The Porcelain Mask

by Nova Haddad

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THE PORCELAIN MASK

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Written by Nova Haddad.

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Dedicated to my eighteen-year-old self,at the crossroads, wondering if it landed on tails instead of heads.

To my Mother.

To the one who stays in Brisbane, and Aachen.

To Teliah, my friend who saw me as the depressed one: our brief one-month bond, yet the first to find light in my writings.

So I carve the shell,

staining it with my own hand, giving it the defects You withheld,

to prove my hatred of Your gift.

Still, the curses keep me tethered.

Even in my despising,

I keep the soul intact

as if the afterlife hangs over me,

a door I dare not open

Act I: Maastricht

Chapter 1: Fall 2022

I

Summer had slipped away, and autumn settled into the streets quietly. The air softened, the dry heat fading into a warm breeze that swept through Maastricht. Leaves started to fall, scattered like forgotten memories across the sidewalks, drifting with the cooling air. Autumn was one of my favourite seasons—not too hot, not too cold, just warm enough. The rain wasn't as harsh as the usual grey Dutch weather, though I was in denial about that too.

It was the middle of the day, and I had class in an hour. Maastricht, split by the Meuse River, was known as a student city—vibrant, easy to make friends. I lived across the river, so every time I needed to go to campus, or anywhere really, I had to cross into the centre.

I crossed *Sint Servaasbrug*, the iconic stone-arch bridge, an ancient relic from the 13th century. It felt like a silent witness to history, old and weathered, and somehow I still got amazed by it.

Back home in Jakarta, history got erased. Buildings torn down to make room for something newer, blander. Here, time carved itself into stone and left traces everywhere.

As I walked over the bridge, the usual frustration stirred. Bicyclists wove in and out of pedestrians, never giving way. But that was nothing compared to being a person of colour in one of the most conservative parts of the Netherlands.

"Ni hao, ni hao, ni hao," an old man sneered in a mocking Chinese accent as he rode past.

My jaw clenched. Heat flashed up my neck. My hand was already moving—middle finger up, arm extended.

He didn't look back. They never did.

I wasn't even Chinese. If you're going to be racist, at least get it right.

Since moving here a year ago, I'd fallen into a routine. Every day I passed a coffee shop on my way to campus. If someone heard that, they'd probably picture a cozy café, baristas steaming milk, the scent of espresso in the air.

A coffee shop in the Netherlands was a weed dispensary. Sure, they sold coffee too, but let's be honest, that was just for show.

I bought my usual, the cheapest blunt. Three euros.

I lit it as I walked, took a slow drag, and felt the buzz slide in—light and numbing, just enough to take the edge off. The first hit always tasted like burnt grass and mistakes. I held it in, counting to five, then exhaled toward the canal.

The buzz came in waves. First the loosening in my shoulders. Then the voices in my head got quieter. Background noise instead of a screaming match.

I liked being lightly stoned before class.

I hadn't prepared for today's discussion. But then again, I never really did.

I pulled up my phone, planning to text Krzys—fuck, it was 15 minutes before tutorial.

I ran.

By the time I reached campus, I was breathless. Took the stairs two at a time, third-floor tutorial room just ahead. I walked in.

Everyone was already seated, notes open, discussions starting in whispers. The tutor wasn't here yet.

Relief.

One empty seat in the corner. Already pre-booked by Krzysztof. He sat next to my designated seat. I'd usually do the same to him if I arrived first, which rarely happened.

Krzysztof was one of the first friends I made during orientation week, and the only one who stuck around. Polish-German, born and raised in Aachen. We bonded over weed, then over shared academic misery.

The first term was broken into three blocks, each two months. Right out of the gate, we got stuck with Quantitative Methods I, infamous for one of the highest failure rates in business.

Before starting, I'd thought it was just math and statistics. How bad could it be?

I was wrong.

The system here ran on Problem-Based Learning.

"This fucking mad Indo," Krzysztof muttered in his thick German accent. "Nearly late to class and smells like fucking weed."

I dropped my bag onto the table and flipped him off.

He smirked, still staring at his notes. "You ready for this tutorial?"

I stared at the worksheet. Row after row of Greek symbols that meant nothing. Krzysztof had one equation half-finished. I had a blank page and twenty minutes left.

"So we just... multiply these?" I asked.

He looked at my paper. "You didn't even start?"

"I'm waiting to be properly taught first before I start."

"That's fucking backward, dumbass."

The tutor walked in. I zoned out almost instantly.

The system was a nightmare.

I looked over at Krzysztof. His face mirrored mine, pure defeat. We both knew what was coming and yet, we never learned.

By the end of class, we turned to each other and asked the same question.

"Did you understand anything?"

"Nah."

A vibrant student city, home to a university highly ranked in business subjects. That was how people back home saw it. They told me I was lucky. They told me I was ungrateful for ending up here, in this small city near the borders of the Netherlands, Germany, and Belgium.

They didn't understand. They never did.

I was too embarrassed to admit it. I wasn't here for academics.

I was here because of my ex-girlfriend.

Before I met her, my life had already been decided. A one-way ticket to Halifax, Nova Scotia. Dalhousie University. My dorm booked. My visa secured. All I had to do was pack my bags and go. Then I met Sofie Bakker in April. We started dating a month later. She knew about Halifax. Said she was fine with it.

Until she wasn't.

"Follow me to the Netherlands," she'd said, crying, begging.

At first I resisted. But she had a script for every objection:

"Ashlynn, Halifax is in the middle of nowhere. You've never lived abroad before. You don't have any relatives there. How will you survive?"

A pause, then softer: "You know I have a brother in the Netherlands. I've been there multiple times. It's safer."

Then the kicker: "Look, only the dumbass party people fail there. It's not a big deal."

"Don't you think going to Halifax is just scary?"

She made it sound like concern. Like protection.

Months later—December, while I was doomscrolling Instagram—I saw the news: Australia had finally opened its borders.

"Sofie, you remember I initially applied to Brisbane back in 2020?"

I hadn't even finished the sentence. I was just excited my cousin could finally leave lockdown.

"You know I can't do long distance."

Her voice had that edge already.

"If you moved, then I don't think we can continue."

"I didn't even say I wanted to go—"

"Then why bring it up?" She was already crying.

"Why would you even say that if you didn't want to leave me?"

The same script as before. Tears as weapon. My thoughts turned into betrayals. Three months later, she dropped out. Decided to go back to Jakarta. I tried long distance. It lasted two weeks.

On a random Tuesday, an hour before my shift, my phone rang. A voice call, not video like usual. Something was off. I picked up. Her voice sounded different—steady at first, then wavering. I had a feeling. I let her lead the conversation, but I wasn't listening.

I was waiting.

"Okay, then it's over, right?" I said.

No hesitation. No second thoughts. I said it before she could.

"That's all?" Her voice cracked.

Maybe she wanted proof. That I was suffering too. That I hurt the way she did.

"No," I said simply. "It's over."

And I hung up. I set the phone face-down on my desk. Stared at the wall.

I waited for something to happen in my chest. Tears. Tightness. That pulling sensation people describe when someone leaves.

Nothing came.

I stood up. Sat back down. Checked my phone—no new messages. The silence felt exactly like the minutes before the call. Nothing had changed, except now it was official. The Lynn who chose the Netherlands for Sofie—I couldn't remember being her anymore. Couldn't remember what made her say yes.

Her excuse: "It just hurts me to do long-distance, and you barely come home enough."

I had followed her across the world. She was the one who left first.

And now long-distance was too much?

I should've laughed. But I wasn't in on the joke.

The phone call lingered as I sat in the Mensa, our university cafeteria. We called it that after the German term. It sounded more serious than "cafeteria," like we were in a war and needed rations.

The School of Business and Economics building was beautiful, like much of Maastricht. The entire campus sat inside a former monastery, yet somehow the Mensa looked sleek and modern. Stainless steel, clean lines, glass walls. Modern hunger inside ancient stone.

Krzysztof had left earlier. Something about his mom needing his car.

I stayed behind. Alone.

I checked my phone, half-expecting a message. There was nothing. It used to light up constantly with texts from Sofie—pointless, exhausting messages I used to find annoying.

Now I missed them.

Voices swelled around me. I glanced up—corner table, five people, leaning into each other. One girl touched another's arm. Easy. Automatic. The kind of gesture you don't think about because you've never had to.

My shoulders were creeping toward my ears. I forced them down.

I looked at my phone. Scrolled through apps I didn't care about. Weather. Calendar. Weather again. Anything that made my face look busy.

I left before I had to watch them leave together.

Outside, rain streaked the glass like it had somewhere to go

It was just a random day. I was really alone. A week in the Netherlands. Staying at Sofie's in Rotterdam, and as usual, I cooked.

I'd texted her earlier. She wanted to eat too.

Sofie: *Lynn. Sorry, forgot to tell you. I'm going to the Soju Bar for dinner with my uni friends*

Sofie: *Won't eat dinner at home.*

I threw the extra portion in the trash. I washed the pan. The smell of the food was still lingered — oregano, tomato, and oil. I didn't eat my portion that time.

A week here. Barely made any friends. She'd arrived way earlier. She barely introduced me to her friends. It's normal, right? Partners should have separate circles.

Everyone was moving forward except me.

It was raining outside. Cold and grey. I decided to sleep the rest of the day. But then I changed my mind.

Lynn: *I'm gonna go somewhere for a moment*

I texted Sofie. Walked to the station. Boarded a random train without checking the destination.

After several stops, my phone buzzed.

Sofie: *Don't go. I will be home really soon*

I didn't respond. Got off at the next station and stood on the platform, just thinking, looking through the rails.

What did she think I meant?

My phone buzzed.

I stopped by my usual coffee shop, the one floating on the river like it was pretending to be romantic. The kind tourists took photos

of. The kind students used as a landmark, not a place to sit and feel things.

I ordered my usual—an "AK-47"—and a milkshake.

I didn't use to sit in coffee shops alone. Back then I thought it was pitiful. Junkie behaviour. People who had nothing else to do. Turns out, I had plenty of opinions when my life still felt like it belonged to me.

I took my order outside, balancing the cup and the milkshake like I wasn't already losing coordination. I hovered near an empty table, hesitating in that stupid way you do when you don't want to admit you're about to be alone.

"Lynn?"

A familiar voice landed behind me, too casual to be kind.

I turned. Chakra.

He was only a year older than me, but he was already in his final year, which made him feel older anyway. Like he'd skipped the part where you panic all the time. His jacket hung open, hair messy in the way that looked accidental but probably wasn't. He looked at my milkshake first, then my cup, like he was assessing damage.

"What are you doing here?" he said, dragging the words out. "Alone?"

I shrugged, like it was a choice, like it was on purpose. "Buying drugs. For my mental health."

"Because of Sofie?" he asked.

I didn't answer. Didn't need to.

Chakra smirked and pulled out the chair across from me without asking. He sat down like he owned the table, like he owned the surrounding air. For a moment, I hated him for how easy he made everything look.

Then he said, quieter, "You know what my therapist told me last year?"

I blinked. "You have a therapist?"

"Yeah," he said. "Don't act surprised. Plug can have feelings too."

I snorted, then took a sip. It tasted like burnt sugar and denial. Chakra leaned back, watching the river like it was doing something interesting.

"He told me this thing. The Bus Driver."

I frowned. "The what?"

"The Bus Driver," he repeated, like it was obvious. Like it wasn't the dumbest title for a metaphor I'd ever heard.

I stared at him. "You mean... like an actual driver?"

"No," he said, flat. "It's a metaphor, Lynn. Try to keep up."

I rolled my eyes, but I didn't stop listening. That was the problem. I always listened to him.

He tapped his fingers against the table, slow, controlled.

"He said lives like driving a bus. You're on your route. You stop. People get on. Friends, lovers, randoms. They sit with you for a while."

"And then they get off," I said, already annoyed.

"Yeah," Chakra said. "They get off. Sometimes they tell you where they're going. Sometimes they don't. Sometimes they slam the door on the way out like you did something wrong."

The words sat in my chest, heavy, even though he said it like it was nothing. I looked down at my cup. The surface of the drink shook slightly when my hand did.

"That's depressing," I muttered.

Chakra shrugged. "It's not depressing. It's normal."

"So what, you're supposed to just... accept it? Everyone comes and goes, and you sit there like some sad bus driver doing overtime?"

Chakra's mouth twitched, almost a smile. "You're not supposed to beg people to stay by holding the doors shut."

I didn't answer. I couldn't. The river kept moving under us, indifferent. The boat rocked so slightly you could pretend it was steady.

Chakra glanced at me, eyes sharp now, like he'd finally decided to look.

"You're doing that thing again," he said.

"What thing."

"The thing where you act like you don't care," he said, "but your whole body is screaming."

I looked away.

He didn't push. Chakra never pushed directly. He just parked a thought in front of you and let you trip over it later.

After a beat, he added, softer, "You don't have to be alone at the stop, you know."

I scoffed, because it was safer than admitting anything. "Wow. Inspirational. Coming from someone who literally just got back together with his ex."

Chakra laughed once. "Shut up."

The river moved beneath us. The coffee shop boat rocked gently, almost imperceptibly. Above us, the September sky held its warmth a little longer, like it wasn't ready to let go yet.

I took another sip. The milkshake was too sweet, the weed starting to wear off, leaving only the edge I'd tried to cover.

Chakra lit a cigarette, offered me one. I shook my head.

"So," he said, exhaling smoke toward the water. "You gonna actually deal with it, or just keep smoking until you forget?"

"Forget what?"

"That you're still waiting for her to text."

My hand tightened around the cup. "I'm not."

"Okay." He didn't believe me. I didn't believe me either.

We sat there for a while, not saying anything. Just two people on a floating coffee shop, watching the river carry things away that would never come back.

Eventually, Chakra stubbed out his cigarette. "I'm heading out. Juliette and I are meeting later. You should come."

"Maybe."

"That means no."

"Yeah."

He stood up, shoved his hands in his jacket pockets. "The bus keeps moving, Lynn. Whether you're ready or not."

I watched him walk away, disappearing into the afternoon crowd. The river kept flowing. The tourists kept taking pictures. The boat kept rocking, steady and indifferent.

I finished my milkshake alone.

My phone buzzed. I checked it immediately.

Bunga: *Indonesian night at mine this Friday! Soto Ayam!*

I stared at the message.

I typed back: *I'll be there.*

I looked at the message for a long time before I hit send.

The bus was still moving. Maybe I'd get back on.

II

We ended up at Krzysztof's new place after the tutorial. Not planned, just the natural drift of two people avoiding their rooms. He used to commute from Aachen, like suffering was a hobby. Recently he'd given up and moved closer, like he'd finally accepted he was allowed to make his life easier. His apartment was fifteen minutes from campus by bike. It doesn't take a time for it to become a hangout spot for our friend group—Juliette, Chakra, Krzysztof, and Bunga.

He rolled a joint at his desk while I sat on the edge of his bed—the only other furniture besides a chair and a gaming setup that took up half the room. The window was open. September air, still warm, carrying the sound of the street below.

"Glad you finally broke up with her," Krzysztof said, not looking up from the rolling paper.

I froze. "What?"

"Sofie." He licked the edge of the paper, sealed it, examined his work. "Chakra said it too. Even Bunga told you, right?"

Bunga. I hadn't thought about her in weeks. Indonesian, like me and Chakra. We'd met at the Indonesian Student Association last year. Had dinner at her place a few times. Then stopped.

"Bunga doesn't even know Sofie," I said.

"Yeah, but she knew you were miserable." He lit the joint, took a drag, passed it to me. "Remember New Year's Eve?"

I took the joint. My hand was shaking. "What about it?"

"She forbade you from hanging with us." He said it so casually, like it was obvious. "For the eve. You wanted to come to the party at Chakra's, and she—what did you say?—she needed you there or she'd throw a tantrum."

"You were hiding in the bathroom pretending you weren't smoking while she video called you. We were all stoned."

"Jesus, you're a stoner," Krzysztof said, but he was smiling. "Even now you're holding a blunt."

I looked down. The joint was burning between my fingers. I'd forgotten to smoke it.

"Look," he said, leaning back in his chair. "I'm not trying to shit on your ex or whatever. But you were always MIA. Before you guys lived together—did you even live together? I thought you were gonna move in together—"

"She changed her mind."

"Yeah, okay. But before that, every weekend you were at hers. Every weekend. And then weekdays you'd be here, but like..." He gestured vaguely at me. "Not here. You know?"

I didn't know. Or I did. The static had been worse back then. Sitting in tutorials and hearing nothing. Walking through campus like a ghost. Checking my phone every five minutes to make sure Sofie wasn't mad.

"You remember that dinner at Bunga's place?" Krzysztof asked.

I nodded. I did remember. June, maybe. Or July. Bunga had made *nasi goreng* and invited a bunch of people over. Indonesian food, the first time in months I'd felt like I could breathe.

"You left early," Krzysztof said. "Like, we'd just finished eating. You got a text and just—" He mimed standing up abruptly. "Said you had to go. Wouldn't even stay for dessert. Bunga made *klepon*. You love *klepon*."

"Sofie needed—"

"What? What did she need?"

I opened my mouth. Closed it. I couldn't remember. Something important. Something urgent. Or maybe just something that felt urgent because Sofie had said it was.

"She texted you constantly," Krzysztof continued. "Like, constantly. Middle of class, middle of conversations, middle of—I don't know, existing. And you'd always check. Always respond immediately. Like you were on call."

"That's normal," I said. "That's what people do in relationships."

"Is it?" He didn't sound judgmental. Just genuinely asking. "Because Bunga texts her boyfriend like twice a day. They've been together three years."

The joint had gone out. I relit it, took a long drag, held the smoke in my lungs until it hurt.

"I'm not trying to make you feel bad," Krzysztof said, quieter now. "I'm just—we were all glad when you said you broke up. Not because we hated her or whatever. Just because—" He paused, searching for words. "You were back. Like, you were here again. You know?"

I didn't know how to tell him I still didn't feel here. That even with Sofie gone, her voice was still in my head. Still telling me I was doing everything wrong. Still making me second-guess every choice.

"She wasn't..." I started, then stopped. "It wasn't that bad."

Krzysztof looked at me for a long moment. Then he took the joint back, took a hit, blew smoke toward the open window.

"Okay," he said. "If you say so."

But his face said: I don't believe you, but I'm not going to argue.

We sat in silence for a while. On Krzysztof's desk, his phone buzzed. He didn't check it.

"For what it's worth," he said, "you seem better now. Still a mess. But your mess."

I'd spent so long being shaped by someone else's hands. To be able to realise what that concept was.

His phone buzzed again. He finally checked it.

"Chakra and Juliette are coming over. Are you staying?"

I should. I knew I should. But I needed to sit with this—with making a choice that was just mine.

"I'm tired," I said.

He walked me to the door. The stairs creaked under my feet, the same sound as always. Outside, the air had that September feel—still warm but promising cold. The bridge was quiet.

Maybe Krzysztof was right. Maybe I was back.

Or maybe I was just learning how to pretend.

It was Friday. Bunga had invited everyone for Indonesian food. I stood in front of my wardrobe, staring. Choosing clothes without someone telling me what to wear felt weird. With Sofie, at least I knew the rules.

My hand reached for the blue sweater, then stopped. She'd ruined that one. I pulled out a long-sleeved shirt. Black. Plain. Nothing she'd touched. It was too hot for long sleeves. The weather app said twenty-two degrees. But the sleeves felt safer.

In the mirror, I looked fine. Good enough.

A dinner. Where everyone was invited. My stomach tightened anyway, like the word still meant the same thing it used to. Because

the first week in the Netherlands, in Rotterdam, it started with a dinner too.

Sofie and I had a regular dinner with her friends. Except it wasn't regular.

"You know, Ashlynn was always doing this dumb stuff," she'd said, laughing. Her friends leaned in. "It's like so funny you wouldn't even notice it. OH, also she's doing this sort of thing—"

I watched them watching me. Their eyes caught something in Sofie's performance—something cruel, or just careless. Hard to tell which. Sofie's eyes were bright. She was *good* at this, at turning my existence into anecdote.

Later, at home, I confronted her in the kitchen.

"Why did you say all of those things in front of your friends?"

She looked down. "I don't know. I'm sorry."

"You did though."

She cried then. Asked for forgiveness. I said yes, it's fine, it's okay. We watched movies that night.

"I'm kind of hungry," she said later.

"Me too. I'll see what we have."

"I want KFC."

"Isn't it going to be expensive with Uber Eats?"

"I don't really have money at the moment." She paused. "I'll just cook some *Indomie*, I reckon."

While I was cooking the *Indomie*—boiling water, the smell of the seasoning packet—she ordered the KFC. Only for herself. I heard the notification ping. Watched her unwrap it. The box was yellow and red and loud, and she ate it alone on the couch while I finished the noodles.

It made me remember elementary school. The kids with their packed lunches from home, real food, things you had to *buy*. Me with whatever my mother could make. I never said anything then either.

I brought two portions of mie goreng to the couch. She was already halfway through her chicken.

"Thanks," she said, not looking at me.

My phone buzzed.

Bunga: *Chakra's already here! And Juliette's bringing wine.*
Bunga: *Can't wait to see you!*

I read it three times, looking for subtext. There was none.

I typed back: **On my way.**

Then stared at it for a full minute, wondering if I should've added an emoji. I grabbed my keys and left before I could change my mind.

It was 7 PM, still bright. I walked down through the usual route. On the left was the bike lane. A cyclist swerved around me without slowing, close enough that I felt the rush of air. I jumped back, heart pounding.

In Jakarta it was scooters. Here it was bikes. Same choreography of near-misses, different vehicle. I'd never learned to ride either one. My parents never taught me. I still couldn't drive a car either. Everything was always "No."

"No, you can't learn to ride a bike."

"No, you can't get your license."

"No, you can't go out."

But I did rebel. In high school, I learned to ride a motorcycle through my friends. My parents never knew. They'd forbidden motorcycles specifically—too dangerous, they said. If they'd found out, they would've locked me in the house permanently. I rode motorcycles all through high school. They still didn't know.

One cage to another. My parents', then Sofie's.

The wind picked up, cooler now. I checked my phone. Still fifteen minutes away. My place and Bunga's were separated by Maastricht station, which meant I had to go through it. Down the

stairs on my side. Across the bridge inside the station. Down the stairs on the other side. Then another fifteen-minute walk.

Even if I could ride a bike, I'd still have to navigate those stairs. I watched people with bikes take the elevator. At night, when the station was empty, that elevator felt wrong. Dead and scary, especially when I walked home at 2 AM.

The station held two years of Sofie commutes. Friday nights, two hours to Rotterdam. Sunday evenings, two hours back. Proving I cared enough to make the trip.

I walked faster.

Finally, I arrived at Bunga's building. Third floor, no elevator. I took the stairs slowly, checking my phone one more time. No messages. No emergencies. No reason to turn back.

I stood outside her door and realised I'd forgotten to bring anything. All the liquor in my room was empty—I'd drunk through it earlier in the week and hadn't restocked. I only had cash for groceries, the twenty euros I'd tucked in my pocket specifically for tonight.

I knocked.

Footsteps. The creak of the door.

Bunga's face—eyebrows up, mouth already curving. No tightness around the eyes. No flicker toward my empty hands.

Relief. I let my shoulders drop.

"Lynn!"

I smiled back—not the careful one, the real one. "Hey! Sorry I'm late."

"You're not late." She stepped aside.

The apartment smelled like home. Like Jakarta. Turmeric and lemongrass and something I couldn't name that made my chest ache.

Soto ayam.

The scent hit me immediately—chicken, turmeric, lemongrass, lime. In the corner, Chakra was talking with Krzysztof and Juliette,

passing a blunt between them. Bunga's boyfriend was in the kitchen, stirring something.

I turned back to Bunga, kept my voice low. "I didn't bring anything. Just cash for groceries."

I watched her face. Waited for the micro-shift—the tightening that meant *noted, filed, remembered*.

Nothing. Just a wave of her hand.

"It doesn't matter. Juliette brought too much wine."

I exhaled.

"Go sit. Food's almost ready."

I walked into the living room. Scanned without meaning to.

Chakra—small wave, eye contact held just long enough. Safe.

Krzysztof—smirk, already looking back at his phone. Neutral.

Juliette—smile that reached her eyes, body angling toward the empty seat beside her. Invitation.

I sat next to Juliette. Let my posture mirror hers—open, leaned back, one leg crossed. The shape of someone relaxed.

She was exactly what you'd picture if someone said "French girl." You could hear it in her accent, see it in the way she carried herself. Blonde wavy hair, usually worn down, but tonight she'd tied it up in a loose bun. Round glasses that made her look smarter than she already was.

She studied Economics and Business, unlike me and Krzysztof, who chose International Business. She was good at math—actually good, not just surviving. Krzysztof and I would be crying in the library over problem sets while Juliette worked through them like they were crossword puzzles.

All three of us had gone through the Foundation Programme, but for different reasons.

Me: because my Indonesian high school education was considered shit here.

Krzysztof: because he'd studied IB but his grades weren't good enough for direct entry.

Juliette: because she only studied up until year 11 in Brisbane, which Maastricht viewed as equivalent as finishing 12 years of Indonesian curriculum.

The Foundation Programme was where they put the people who didn't fit. The ones who needed an extra year to prove they belonged. We'd proven it. And now we were all suffering through Quantitative Methods together.

"You look stressed," Juliette said, passing me the blunt.

I took it, inhaled, held the smoke. "I always look stressed."

"True." She smiled. "But tonight you look extra stressed."

Krzysztof snorted. "She's been stressed since September fourth."

I flipped him off.

Chakra leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "Quantitative Methods, huh?"

I just sighed.

"Food's ready!" Bunga called from the kitchen.

We all stood up, moved toward the table. Bunga had set out everything: *soto ayam, nasi putih, kerupuk, sambal.* Her boyfriend brought out a plate of *perkedel*. Someone else had made *es teh manis*. Indonesian food. Indonesian people. Indonesian conversation happening in the background, a mix of English and Bahasa like code-switching home.

I sat down at the table between Juliette and Chakra. Across from me, Krzysztof was already piling food onto his plate like he hadn't eaten in days.

"*Merde*, Krzysztof," Juliette said. "Save some for the rest of us."

He didn't look up. He shovelled another mouthful of rice in like he was racing a clock.

"Brain needs calories," he said, cheeks full.

Bunga laughed from the kitchen. "You're scared of math."

I picked up my spoon. The first taste of *soto ayam* was exactly like I remembered. Exactly like the version my grandmother used to make before she died. Warm, salty, a little sour from the lime. Comfort in a bowl.

I hadn't realised how hungry I was.

For a moment, I let myself relax.

Chakra caught my eye across the table. He smiled, small and knowing.

III

I opened my eyes.

Everything hurt, but not in a dramatic way—more like the world was too loud, and my body had shrunk. My mouth was dry. My head heavy. A hangover that didn't feel like pain, just a weight pressing everything down. I was back in my bedroom, somehow. I didn't know who dragged me home. I didn't ask. The sunlight cut through the blinds in harsh slits, slicing the air into lines.

My room was a mess. Shirts scattered across the floor. Makeup pads stained with eyeliner. Towels half-draped over the chair. An open bottle of nail polish left uncapped, dried around the rim. My wardrobe door wouldn't even close properly, stuffed full of things I didn't remember wearing anymore.

I didn't look in the mirror. I already knew.

I used to tape mirrors shut. Whole rolls of masking tape over the glass. Strip after strip until the surface disappeared.

The door opened right in front of one. I couldn't walk into my own room without seeing.

So I stopped seeing.

I washed my face, moved through my skincare like muscle memory. I grabbed a pack of Marlboro Gold from the drawer, lit one by the window. We weren't supposed to smoke in student accommodation, but no one ever stopped me.

Morning was for cigarettes and coffee. Evening was for weed. That was the order now. That was the pattern. My phone buzzed a few times. Snapchat. Instagram. I didn't check. Notifications were just noise when your body was still underwater.

I opened the fridge, pulled out a ready-to-eat meal. I forced myself to eat. I remembered someone saying food helped with the crash. Or maybe I made that up. Either way, I ate. The taste didn't matter.

My room was too full, but I felt empty.

I lay on my bed again, stared at the ceiling, listened to the buzz of the outside world bleeding through the window cracks. I wasn't alone anymore. The Sertraline made everything flat. Not peaceful—flat. Like someone had turned down the volume on my entire nervous system.

But I was still different. I could feel it in the way they spoke to each other, in the way they didn't look at me the same. Like a sharp green in a pastel-coloured crowd.

I kept thinking about what happened last night. The last thing I remembered, I followed Bunga through the line outside Complex, past the ID check, into the dark warmth of the club. Her pupils were huge. The music was too loud to think. Bass thudded in my ribs. Whatever I'd taken earlier was wearing off.

"Lynn, try this."

I swallowed it without thinking.

Then something shifted. My head cleared. Everything lined up—chronological, structured, like someone finally put my brain into folders. I felt okay. Not happy. Not excited. Just okay.

I wanted to sit. Nothing else.

I left the group on the dance floor and went outside, next to the river, under the bridge. Alone. I don't know how to explain it. Chakra told me it was supposed to feel like mild ecstasy—bouncy, floaty.

But I didn't feel bouncy. I felt calm. I just sat there and listened to the river.

When I went back inside, I saw Krzysztof crouched low near the wall, hands in his hair like he was trying to hold his head together. Chakra was next to him, watching him the way you watch a pot that's about to boil over.

My stomach dropped, even though the pill had flattened everything else.

"What happened?" I asked.

Chakra looked up at me, unimpressed. "Bad trip. Told you so."

I remembered the pre-drinks. Someone's cramped apartment, the air thick with cheap deodorant and spilled vodka, everyone shouting over a speaker that wasn't loud enough. Krzysztof had been grinning too hard, insisting he wanted to try acid for the first time.

And not just acid. Acid and ecstasy, stacked like it was a flex.

Chakra argued with him. Said you don't do a first-time trip at a rave. Not with lights like this. Not with bass like this.

Krzysztof didn't listen.

He never did.

"Holy fuck," Krzysztof screamed, voice cracking. "My vision flipped upside down."

He lurched forward like he was going to be sick, then jerked back like the ground had moved. His eyes were wide and wet, not looking at any of us properly.

I stood there, jaw clenched, watching him like he was happening behind glass.

Chakra moved immediately. Grabbed his shoulder. Steered him away from the entrance, away from the noise, fast. Like he'd done this before. Like he had a system.

No wonder everyone went to him.

I didn't feel like doing anything after that. I went to the smoking area, fumbling with my lighter. My hands shook, which annoyed me because everything else felt so clean and sorted.

Then I saw Juliette.

She hadn't noticed me yet.

She was holding a cone, already looking guilty before anyone said anything. I knew her partner didn't want her smoking. Not weed. Not cigarettes. Nothing. Like they owned her lungs. When she finally saw me, her eyes went wide.

"Whoa, Lynn?"

Then, immediately, softer, urgent: "Please don't tell them."

Guilt slid into my throat. Back then, the first time I met Juliette, she hadn't done anything other than alcohol. And I acted like I was doing her a favour when I offered her a joint. Like it was harmless.

Inside again, I headed to the bathroom. The mirror was cracked. The light flickered—the kind of lighting that made everything look like a confession. I caught myself, and for a second I didn't recognise her.

My hand went to my bag anyway.

The usual.

Crush. Line. Snort.

I couldn't even see how much I'd crushed. My nose burned. My eyes watered. My reflection blurred, and I stood there, staring at myself like I was a stranger I didn't want to claim.

I grabbed my phone and called Chakra before I could chicken out. He picked up fast, like he'd been waiting for it.

"Chakra," I said. "What the fuck did you give Bunga last night?"

A pause. Not guilty. Just weighing.

"Just the usual," he said. *"Dexies."*

"Dexies?"

"Yeah."

It was nearly the end of September. Exam week would eat me alive in a month. I could feel it already, like a bruise forming.

"Look," I said, and my voice climbed without permission, "it barely worked like you told me. The fuck you mean it was a mild ecstasy—it made me sit."

I heard myself getting too loud. Too sharp.

Chakra didn't bite back.

"Whoa," he said, measured. "Calm down."

I hated him a little for sounding like that.

“It’s a study drug,” he added. "Some people take it to rave. For the extra energies. Some people take it to study. For extra locked in. You go to the library and it's basically a rave, but instead of ecstasy it's *dexies* and *addy*."

I snorted. "That's the most depressing sentence I've ever heard."

He ignored that.

The *dexies* did something the Sertraline never did. They didn't make me happy. They made me present. Like I'd been watching my life through foggy glass and someone had wiped it clean. Isn’t that how the sertraline supposed to work? To shut the mind, right?

"Look," I said. "How much do you have right now?"

"I still got twenty-five left,”

Silence. Then he exhaled, like that number changed the whole situation.

"Say less," I said.

I hung up before he could lecture me.

I washed my face. Cold water. Enough to sting. I got dressed without thinking—black tank top, baggy Dickies, 1460s. Not the platform ones. I didn't feel like pretending to be tall.

I rolled a joint with hands that felt too steady, too precise.

My hair was still greasy from the night before, eyeliner smudged under my eyes. I didn't bother fixing it. I grabbed my keys, shoved my phone into my pocket, and dragged my bike out.

I'd just secured the *dexies* from Chakra's place when he stopped me at the door.

“Smoke?”

A smoke first. Of course. I could never turn down an offer like that.

He fished a crumpled pack from his pocket, then flicked his lighter once, twice, until it caught. He held out a *Gudang Garam*—Indonesian clove cigarettes, sweet and brutal, cancer dressed up like comfort.

I should've said no. I never did. I took one, brought it to my lips, and leaned into the flame.

The tip glowed.

I inhaled.

"So basically, there's this girl. I'm not really sure if she's into me. She got me lunch while I study though. But she's just—"

"You already mentioned this girl since May, and you're still unsure," I cut in.

"Ahhh, I don't know, I don't know," he said, dragging it out like he wanted me to solve it. "What do you think, Lynn?"

"Fuck you," I said, because sarcasm was easier than sincerity. "The only reason you're not sure is because she's not really your type."

He groaned. "Well, yeah, but she seems so nice to me. It might just be friendly signs. The other day she gave me snacks while I was studying at the library. I don't know."

"You're asking the wrong person," I said. "Hell if I know as well."

My phone rang.

Sofie.

I answered without thinking, like muscle memory did it for me.

"I'm sorry," Sofie said.

Her voice sounded steady at first, then it wavered, like she hated herself for wavering.

“I’m sorry for leading you there, I know it’s my fault.”

"But deep down, Ashlynn... compared to everyone else, you still have a space. Deep down in my heart."

I didn't speak. I held my breath like it would change what she was about to say.

"Thank you," she continued, softer now, "for being a place I could call home. Even if it was temporary."

Beep.

I hanged it up. My lips didn't even move.

Chakra didn't ask what she said. He didn't make it a therapy session. He just watched my face the way people watch weather, like he was waiting to see what kind of day I was going to become.

My phone buzzed again.

> ***Juliette**: Lynn, where are you? I'm already on my way to Vrijthof.*

I froze.

Shit. I forgot.

The sun still hit like summer, but the air had started to shift. Not cold yet. Just less forgiving. Semester weather.

I rode into the centre with my jaw clenched, the wind drying the sweat that never fully happened. Maastricht looked too clean in this light—brick warm-toned, sky bright enough to make you feel exposed. Basically, a tourist wet dream. Usually the kind of day that made you feel guilty if you didn't feel grateful.

Vrijthof was crowded. Terraces full. Tourists and students spilling across the square like they'd all been assigned the same script. Laughter, cutlery, beer glasses clinking—that loop of sound that never lands on anything real.

People stood in clusters holding drinks like props. Groups posed for photos like they'd never been lonely a day in their lives.

Juliette was waiting near the edge of the square, hands in her pockets, shoulders relaxed in a way that made me resent her a little.

She wasn't doing the bright version of herself today. No overcompensating smile, no cheerful performance.

Just... there.

She saw me and her face softened.

"Hey," she said. "I was about to text again."

"Sorry," I said. "Overslept."

She didn't question it. She never did when she didn't want to open a door. She just nodded and glanced around like she was checking how loud the world was.

"It's packed," she said.

"Inside is worse," I muttered.

She laughed, quiet, like it surprised her too.

We started walking, weaving between terrace chairs and people who refused to move out of the way. The air was thick with smells—fries, coffee, sugar, something fried twice. It made my stomach turn a little, like my body still hadn't forgiven me for last night.

A busker played somewhere near the centre of the square, but the sound felt warped, like it couldn't find a place to sit. We passed a stall selling miniature doughnuts. The scent stuck to my clothes.

"You have been up to much lately?" Juliette asked.

"Raving," I said. "Tried acid last week."

She nodded like it was normal.

"What was it like?"

"Quiet," I said. "Not in a bad way. Like I could finally hear my thoughts without flinching."

Juliette looked at me for a second, like she was choosing whether to say something real.

"Sometimes psychedelics just remind you of the stuff you already know," she said finally, "but softer."

I watched her mouth after she said it, half-expecting her to take it back and wrap it in a joke. She didn't. Nothing about her felt

performative right now. It was unsettling, how much that changed her.

“How about you?”

"I finished a book last night," Juliette said.

"Good?"

"I don't know. It made me angry." She paused.

"It's about a man who kills someone. But that's not why they condemn him. They condemn him because he didn't cry at his mother's funeral."

"That's the whole thing?"

“Yeah, the murder barely matters. What matters is he doesn't perform grief the way they expect. So they decide he's a monster."

She looked at the river. "I kept thinking — what if he did feel it? What if he just couldn't show it the right way?"

I didn't say anything. My throat felt tight for reasons I couldn't name.

"You ever get the feeling you're surrounded by people," I asked, "but you're still the only one looking around?"

She didn't answer right away. We kept walking past bodies and noise, past conversations that sounded like they'd been rehearsed, like nobody wanted to admit they were scared of silence too.

"Sometimes," she said eventually. "But I think some people just notice more than others."

We ended up nearer the river, where the air opened up and the city loosened its grip. We found a bench with the Maas in view, the water moving the way it always did—indifferent, metallic under the light.

I sipped from a bottle of water that didn't taste like anything. The day had melted into one continuous noise—sun and bodies and movement. I was here. Physically. That was all I could confirm.

Time slipped the way it always did when you weren't paying attention. The sky started to dim, slowly, and the river caught it first,

turning from bright to darker shades like it was rehearsing night. I blinked and felt annoyed at how fast it happened.

"Have you been in a relationship?" Juliette asked.

"Yeah," I said. "Crazy ones, though. Moved my ass over from home to here. Changed the trajectory of my life. You?"

"I'm in a relationship," she said. "She used to be my best friend for several years. And now we're together."

"No way."

"Yup."

"So you're talking in the same language, right?"

The question came out casual, but it snagged in my head immediately. Made me think: how do people with two different native languages love each other? Because sometimes there's something that just can't be explained in a second language, isn't there?

"Yeah," Juliette said. "I couldn't imagine myself dating someone who didn't speak my own language. I think it's just hard to express love, or even communicate properly, in a different mother tongue. Sometimes it's just easier to be myself in my native language."

I nodded like I understood.

Honestly, I wrote my journals in English. I never had the experience of expressing my emotions in my own native language. Even with Sofie, every time we had a serious talk, it wasn't in Indonesian.

I didn't understand.

Juliette's point about language sat in my head like a stone. The idea that love could live easier in your mother tongue, that you could say the right thing without translating your whole soul first.

Sofie's words still sat in my chest—temporary home, deep down in my heart—and it didn't even feel romantic. It felt like a bruise you keep touching to check if it still hurts.

The *Maas* kept moving. *Vrijthof* kept sounding like cutlery and laughter and people pretending they weren't scared of silence. Juliette looked calm in that quiet way she only had when nobody else was watching her.

And my brain did what it always did. It grabbed a memory and shoved it in front of me like a receipt.

IV

When my therapist asked about the most recent incident before I relapsed, I told her. At least I'd been clean for almost a year, which I was lowkey proud of.

"What happened?" she said.

The memories crawled back in. It felt heavy—unlike before that final call with Sofie. It had been a month since that call.

I was unsure how to start. That night felt like any other night. I thought I'd been clean and okay. 2018 was the last time any of it had happened, I said.

My heart felt heavier. I could feel it beating. I thought I was happy. But the thoughts came and never stopped. With the border news and what-if possibilities clouding over and over again. It was 3 AM, I said. I couldn't sleep that night. I was like an aimless human being. It was like I followed my instinct. I grabbed any sharp thing I could see. I walked slowly. Tried not to wake her up. I glanced at her. Seeing her sleep peacefully. She didn't have academic stress. There was no ghost of getting kicked out in the first year. I was struggling even in the foundation year. Then I did it.

I just did what the younger me learned to cope. Then Sofie woke up. Slowly. I didn't realise at first. Then she just called my name.

"Lynn."

Sofie realised I wasn't next to her. It was dark, the light turned off. Then she turned on the light and saw me.

Sofie cried. I could see the tears and her look. It wasn't disappointment in her eyes. It felt like guilt—not shame. A guilt from not knowing about my mental history.

"What did I do wrong?" Sofie's voice cracked.

"Lynn."

"Please, tell me if there's something bothering you."

"If—there's anything."

I said to the therapist: That was the last time I told anyone.

It's just—the thoughts won't stop. It's the only temporary relief. Sometimes, I said, it's not that much. I can still handle it.

Luckily she didn't know I used weed. Weed was the alternative—to shut them out. So I could sleep easier too. Until I tried those pills Chakra sold me. I knew it was a study drug. It calmed me as well. One of the reasons I studied more in the past weeks since I got it.

"Lynn." She exhaled.

"I'm really sure that your depression is most likely because of underlying issues. With how it fluctuates—the numbness, then the agitation, then the numbness again. It's been a year. I don't have the authority to diagnose you."

She paused.

"I want to refer you to a psychiatrist. I suspect there might be something else—possibly a mood disorder. But that's not my call to make."

Those acronyms. I didn't know what they meant. Sounded complicated.

"You'll need a proper assessment. But the waitlist is long. In the meantime, we should talk about your current medication. The Sertraline—how is it making you feel?"

"Flat," I said. "Like nothing matters. Not in a sad way. Just... nothing."

She wrote something down.

"But, in the meantime. Your GP's should be able to managed your medications. If you like, I could share the reports to him as well."

I just nodded. Obviously. Another referral. Another waitlist. Another few months wasted.

This time I'd already waited nearly half my time in the Netherlands. I just wanted to know what the root of it was. Why it never ended.

I'd hopped from therapist to therapist, country to country, and it was always the same. The diagnosis, and then what? No real treatment plan. Just another referral, passing me along like an unsolvable problem.

It was nearly the end of autumn. The sky stayed a dull grey, like it had all year. The sun barely made an appearance anymore. Rain fell almost constantly.

I couldn't count how many people I passed wearing windbreakers and puffer jackets. This was true Dutch weather, the one that people joked about with deadpan sarcasm. No wonder small talk about the weather felt pointless. The answer was always the same.

I stepped out of the clinic, a short walk from the city centre. A few steps away stood Market Square, its grand plaza dominated by the seventeenth-century *Stadhuis*. I used to admire it. Now I'd walked past it too many times. It was just another checkpoint on my way to campus.

The farmers market was where Sofie and I used to buy cheese and eat it like a snack, dipping it in strawberry jam, curled up under blankets in the middle of winter. Now it was just another errand. Just another way to prove I was still functioning

Now, I needed to wait. Just, another month.

Later that night, usually students went out because most of them went back to their parents' places on the weekends. The ones who

stayed were the ones who couldn't go home. The international students. The ones whose home was too far or not home anymore.

My phone buzzed. Chakra.

I couldn't make out what he was saying through the static and slurred words, but I caught: Drunk. Close. Crash. Over.

Fifteen minutes later, he was at my door, leaning against the frame like it was the only thing holding him up.

"Lynn," he said, my name thick in his mouth. "I fucked up."

"Yeah, you did." I pulled him inside before anyone in the hallway saw.

He went straight for the sofa and collapsed. Then immediately lurched forward, puking.

"Fuck." I grabbed my phone, dialled Bunga.

She picked up on the first ring. "Yeah?"

"I need help. Chakra's—"

"On my way."

She didn't even ask. That was Bunga. If Chakra was like a mentor—the older brother who'd been through it and survived—Bunga was the oldest sibling I'd never had. The one who showed up without being asked. The one who knew before you said it. She lived on the same side of the city as me, across the river. Fifteen minutes by bike, less if you ran the lights. I pulled Chakra's hair back while he puked again, trying not to breathe through my nose. He muttered something in Indonesian I didn't catch.

"You're okay," I said, even though he wasn't.

Even though neither of us were. The knock came exactly fifteen minutes later. I opened the door. Bunga stood there in her work uniform—she'd just finished a shift at the Bar downtown. Her eyes went immediately to Chakra on the sofa, then swept across my dorm room. The bong on the table. The grinder with weed dust scattered around it like snow. Unwashed dishes stacked in the sink for days. Clothes in piles I'd stopped bothering to sort into clean or dirty.

She didn't say anything about it. Just stepped inside and closed the door behind her.

"How much did he drink?"

"I don't know. He was like this when he showed up. He was holding a Jägermeister bottle that was nearly empty. But I threw it away."

We tried to help him sit up. He was dead weight, arms loose, head lolling. He puked again, this time missing the bucket.

"Fuck," I said.

"It's fine."

Bunga was already moving, grabbing the bucket from the hallway bathroom, repositioning it next to the sofa. She'd done this before. We both had. Chakra mumbled something, eyes half-closed.

"Wake up," Bunga said in Indonesian. "Don't fall asleep yet."

We sat on the edge of my bed, watching him. Making sure he kept breathing. Making sure he didn't choke. That's when she noticed.

Her eyes went to my wrist. The sleeve had ridden up when I'd helped move Chakra. The scar was visible. Faint but there. Fresh enough to still be pink.

I pulled the sleeve down. Too late.

Bunga didn't look away. "How long?"

"It's nothing."

"Lynn."

I stared at the floor. At the clothes I hadn't washed. At the weed dust. At Chakra passed out on my sofa because he'd drunk himself into oblivion for reasons I probably understood better than I wanted to.

"Three days ago," I said. "I think. I don't remember doing it."

Bunga exhaled slowly. "First year is tough. I know."

She said it like she meant it. Like she'd been exactly where I was sitting.

"I was almost one of the ones who failed, you know," she continued. "First year. COVID. Lost my grandfather. I was failing classes, couldn't get out of bed, the whole thing."

I looked up. Bunga always seemed so put together. Like she had her shit figured out.

"I didn't think—"

"No one does." She smiled, but it was sad. "That's the point. We all walk around pretending we're fine."

Chakra groaned from the sofa. We both glanced over. Still breathing. Still there.

"Come on," Bunga said, standing. "Let's smoke outside. Give him some space."

We went downstairs to the courtyard. It was close to midnight. Cold enough that I could see my breath. I should've grabbed a jacket, but I didn't want to go back inside yet. Bunga pulled out a pre-rolled joint, lit it, took a drag. Passed it to me. We stood there in silence for a while, watching our breath mix with the smoke. Then Bunga rolled up her sleeve. Scars. Not one. Several. Running up her forearm like a map of everywhere she'd been that she didn't want to remember.

"I was there too," she said quietly.

I stared. I'd known Bunga for a year. Eaten at her place. Laughed at her jokes. Listened to her talk about her restaurant job and her classes and her plans for after graduation.

I'd never known.

"First year was hell for me," she said. "COVID lockdowns. Couldn't go home. Couldn't see my family. Grandfather died and I wasn't there. Failed two classes. Thought about dropping out every single day."

She took the joint back, hit it, blew smoke into the cold air.

"I went to student services. Told them I needed help. They can make accommodations, you know. Medical exemptions. Extensions. Even a gap year if you need it."

"I can't take a gap year," I said. "I'd lose my Visa."

"Then accommodations. Medical documentation. Therapy referrals."

She looked at me. "There's still help. You don't have to do this alone."

I wanted to believe her. I wanted to believe that asking for help wouldn't make everything worse. That admitting I was drowning wouldn't make me drown faster.

But I'd spent so long learning that needing help meant you were weak. That asking for anything was already too much.

"What if it's not enough?" I asked. "What if I get the help and I still can't do it?"

Bunga was quiet for a moment. The joint burned between her fingers.

"Then you tried," she said finally. "That's more than most people do."

We finished the joint in silence. My phone buzzed. I checked it.

Chakra had texted, somehow: *sorry*

Just that. One word.

"He does this sometimes," Bunga said, reading over my shoulder. "Gets too drunk. Shows up. Apologises."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "Same reason we do anything. Because it hurts less than sitting alone with it."

We went back upstairs. Chakra was still on the sofa, but sitting up now, head in his hands.

"Are you good?" I asked.

"No," he said. Then: "Sorry. For this."

"It's fine."

It wasn't fine. But we all said it anyway. Bunga helped me clean up the puke, dump the bucket, crack a window. We got Chakra

water, made him drink it, made him promise not to fall asleep until he was sober enough to make it home.

At two in the morning, Bunga finally left. She hugged me at the door.

"Think about it," she said. "Student services. Medical accommodations. You don't have to raw dog this."

I nodded. I didn't know if I believed her. But I was tired enough to want to.

After she left, I sat on the edge of the bed. Chakra was half-asleep on the sofa, breathing steady now. The room still smelled like puke and weed and failure.

I looked at my wrist. The scar Bunga had seen. The one I couldn't remember making.

There's still help, she'd said.

Maybe. Or maybe some of us were just better at pretending we'd made it to the other side. I pulled my sleeve down and tried to sleep.

V

It was Lieke's birthday party.

I stared down at my phone, thumb hovering over the screen. There were unspoken rules with parties and invitations. You show up, you act normal, you bring something.

Before I went to her place, I stopped at the liquor store around the corner from her flat.

The clerk read off my ID, hesitating slightly over my last name. He checked the date, then nodded.

"Born in 2002. Oh, you're over 18. It's fine."

It was strange. Back home you had to be 21 to buy alcohol, like in the States. Here, just 18. One of many small culture shocks.

I placed three bottles of *soju* on the counter, then added a pack of *Yakult.* Was this enough? Would they even like what I brought?

I paid, grabbed the bag, and stepped back onto the street. The store was only a few blocks away, near the corner by Lieke's house.

A voice came from inside.

"Lieke! Lynn is here."

Noisy footsteps, then the creaking of old wooden stairs. Lieke came down to pick me up. She was tall by international standards. I guess they stole our spices and resources too much and left us malnourished.

As I walked up the stairs, the bag of *soju* and *Yakult* tucked under my arm, I spotted Krzysztof and Juliette sitting together.

They were a packaged deal, but not in a sweet way. More like a pair of magnets that couldn't decide whether to stick or fight. Krzysztof looked half-dead, slouched into the couch like gravity had a personal vendetta. Juliette sat upright, smiling like she was auditioning for functional mental health.

Juliette saw the bag and lit up. "Oh my god, Lynn, what is that?"

Krzysztof squinted. "Is that... *soju*?"

"Hey, Lynn, isn't that *soju*?"

I heard the voice before I saw her. Something in my spine straightened without permission.

Ella.

Red hair—deep, almost unnatural. Eyeliner sharp enough to cut. She stood with her weight on one hip, drink loose in her hand, already looking at me like she'd been waiting.

Not sizing up. Something else.

My face was doing something. I didn't know what.

"I like your sweater," she said. "The dinosaur's kinda awful. In a good way."

I looked down. Purple sweater. Goofy dinosaur print. I'd grabbed it without thinking.

"You have shit taste, then," I said. Kept my voice flat. Didn't let it shake.

She laughed. "Obviously."

I felt something flicker. Lieke's voice cut in behind Ella, and the moment closed. She sat down next to her, seamlessly folding herself into the conversation, and just like that, the topic shifted.

I forced a grin and held up the bag.

"Alright," I said. "Who's brave enough to try this?"

From the looks on their faces, no one knew what *soju* was, especially not mixed with *Yakult*. Ella perked up though, and started explaining how it was one of her favourites. The room followed her lead. Someone shrugged. Someone poured a shot.

One sip in, and everyone regretted it.

Juliette coughed once, politely, like she would rather not offend the drink. "It's... interesting."

Krzysztof gagged with no shame. "That tastes like yogurt that wants to hurt you."

Someone laughed. Someone else tried it anyway, because pain was a social activity.

"Oh my god," Lieke wheezed.

Juliette made a face and tried to recover it into a smile. "I love how... unique it is."

"It tastes like—" Krzysztof started, then stopped, like he didn't want to finish the thought.

I ignored them and mixed my drink, *soju* and *Yakult*. It tasted fine.

Someone snorted. "What the fuck, Lynn? Why did you put it in the whole glass?"

I glanced up. One of Lieke's friends was laughing, pointing at my cup like it was evidence.

"Oh my god," Lieke wheezed again, louder this time.

"Milk girl," someone muttered.

Laughter rippled through the room. I rolled my eyes and took another sip. They turned to look at me and Ella, both of us drinking it like it was nothing.

Krzysztof stared like he was watching someone eat toothpaste.

Juliette leaned in, delighted. "Wait. You actually like it?"

"It's fine," I said.

Krzysztof shook his head. "You're insane."

The conversation moved on, flowing from one topic to another, shifting like water, impossible to hold on to. People didn't know when to leave. They kept talking like it mattered, like the night was infinite.

The party didn't end cleanly. It dragged the way student parties always did, refusing to die. Lieke had been the first person here — because she'd texted me the address two hours before anyone else had confirmed. She floated between groups now with the ease of someone who'd already done the hard work of showing up. Even drunk, she never looked lost. She never looked like she needed to be found, either.

I watched her and felt that familiar irritation.

Krzysztof and Juliette hovered near the kitchen. Juliette laughed too bright at everything, like she could keep the mood alive by force. Krzysztof offered commentary like he was paid to be miserable.

Ella leaned in a little, her perfume cutting through the alcohol and stale heat of the room.

"Are you okay?" she asked, tipping her cup toward me.

I nodded automatically.

Then I asked it like I didn't care, like it was just another thing you say when you run out of small talk.

"I was just wondering," I said, keeping my voice light enough to fool someone who wasn't listening, "if you want to go grab a kebab with me after this party?"

Ella looked at me for a second. Not confused. Just reading.

Then she repeated it, like she was testing how it sounded out loud.

"A kebab?"

She smiled, small, and shrugged.

"Sure," she said. "I'm starving anyway."

People started leaving in waves. Jackets and keys. Loud Dutch goodbyes that ricocheted off the walls. Someone stumbled on the stairs and laughed like it was charming.

Lieke hugged me too tightly and called me "milk girl" again, like it was affectionate, like it wasn't humiliating.

I rolled my eyes like I didn't care.

Ella tugged on her jacket and glanced at me over her shoulder.

"Ready?" she asked.

Outside, Maastricht hit my face with damp cold. Not freezing, not dramatic, just wet air that clung to hair and clothes and made everything feel slightly dirty. Streetlights reflected off the pavement like the city had been rinsed. Bikes were chained to everything, stacked against railings and poles like they were multiplying.

The centre didn't feel alive exactly, just awake, like it never fully slept.

Ella's hair looked even redder out here, dyed in that deep shade that looked almost unnatural under the lights. The sharp angles of her eyeliner stayed intact like she'd drawn them with purpose.

I watched without meaning to. She caught me and asked, "What?"

"Nothing," I said too fast.

She smirked. "Sure."

We walked toward the centre without really naming where we were going. She moved like she had a map in her head, even if she didn't.

Silence always made my brain too loud, so I filled it.

"You're Belgian, right?"

Ella glanced at me. "You're asking normally or are you about to guess my entire ethnicity?"

"Normally," I said.

"Belgium," she replied. "But my mom's Algerian." She shoved her hands deeper into her pockets. "People always assume I'm French."

"That's... common," I said.

"It's lazy," she said, like it was a moral argument. "Also, I'm not French."

Fair.

The kebab place we ended up at looked like every kebab place in every student city. Bright menu. Food photos that made everything look slightly wet. A guy behind the counter who looked like he'd watched a thousand drunk students ruin their stomachs and never learned to care.

Ella leaned toward the menu like it mattered.

"So," she said, "what are you getting?"

I hesitated. "*Kapsalon,*" I said.

Ella turned so fast it made me blink. "No way."

"What."

She laughed, grinning. "That's such a munchies order. Fries, meat, cheese, salad, sauce. It's an edible regret when you sober up."

"That's the point," I said.

She ordered before I could change my mind, like she enjoyed taking control of small things that weren't hers.

I hated that I liked it.

We ate outside because the fluorescent lights inside felt too harsh, too exposing. The cardboard box warmed my hands, already greasy at the bottom. I took a bite—garlic sauce first, too much, burning a little.

It tasted like relief anyway.

Mid-chew, Ella started humming.

I stared at her. "Uh... Ella, are you good?"

She froze with her fork halfway to her mouth, then laughed. "Sorry. Just a habit. I hum random songs when I'm eating."

I laughed too, because it was either that or admit how much it softened something in me.

The silence after didn't feel awkward. It just existed. Around us, the night kept making noise—bike bells in the distance, footsteps, someone shouting in Dutch, a door slamming somewhere down the street—but I barely registered it.

I focused on her.

"Are you a dog person or a cat person?" she asked, tilting her head.

I hesitated. It always sounded like a personality test disguised as a joke. "That's hard," I said.

"It shouldn't be," she replied, eyes narrowing like she was serious.

"I had both," I said.

"And?" She raised an eyebrow, waiting.

I looked down at my food, picking at the fries to buy time. "Dogs need too much attention," I finally admitted. "You have to be constantly present. They notice when you leave. Cats don't care as much."

She smirked. "That sounds depressing."

I shrugged.

Ella pulled out her phone and held it toward me. "Here, let me show you my cat."

On the screen, a small cat curled up on a windowsill, round-faced, eyes half-open, judging. Like it knew more than anyone in the room.

"Looks like the kind of cat that always gets what it wants," I said.

Ella laughed. "Yeah. She's a little princess. What about you?"

I hesitated, scrolled too fast, skipped things I didn't want her to see, then found one—my cat stretched out in the sun, one paw hanging off the couch.

"This was mine," I said.

She looked at the screen for a moment. "He looks like he was really chill."

"He was," I said, and the pause after felt heavier than it should've.

Her box was basically clean, even the fries, even the little bits. I'd barely finished half.

"You must've been starving," I said.

Ella grinned. "My mom always scolded me if I didn't clean my plate. Especially the rice. Had to eat every single grain."

"Yeah," I said, laughing. "Immigrant moms, hey."

She raised her eyebrow, amused, like she knew what I almost said and let it slide. "My dad's like that," she added. "He'll stare at your plate like it's a moral failure."

I snorted. "Same energy."

For a moment, it felt familiar in that irritating way, like you could belong somewhere without trying.

After we finished, I asked if she wanted to walk by the river. She nodded without hesitation.

The Maas smelled the way it always did—mildly metallic, a little dirty, but weirdly familiar. The damp cold stuck to my hair. The lights from the city fractured across the water, broken reflections stretching too far to touch.

Ella started humming again, and I recognised it instantly.

I said, mostly as a joke, "I love The Smiths." Half *500 Days of Summer*, half test.

She tilted her head. "Sorry?"

"I said... I love The Smiths," I repeated, slower.

Out of nowhere, she started singing, soft and effortless, not performative, like it was just something inside her that finally had room to come out.

I laughed, louder than I meant to, and asked, "What are you, Summer?"

She only smiled, then kept going, like she couldn't help it. She sang like she'd forgotten to be embarrassed.

I stopped walking without realising it. The world kept moving around us—bikes cutting too close, people passing by, wind brushing off the river—but I just stood there watching.

When she finished the verse, she looked at me, eyes playful, and said, "Your move."

I scoffed and shoved my hands into my pockets. "Now you're making me sing?"

She shrugged, the same smile, the same softness.

I exhaled, then hummed the next line, quiet, almost under my breath, just enough for her to hear it, just enough to say I was here without giving too much away.

She nodded, satisfied, and we kept walking.

It was stupid. It was cheesy.

The river looked different at night. The air felt heavier, softer. The water moved slower, darker, like it was tired. City lights shimmered across the surface, broken reflections stretching too far to touch.

We sank onto the edge near the bridge, sitting side by side. It was quiet. We were both just mesmerised.

"This place brings back memories," I said softly.

Ella looked at me, waiting.

"I used to come here a lot," I continued, and the words came out easier than I expected. "With a close friend. We'd watch the sunset. Sometimes just sit in silence."

I didn't say his name.

She made a sound in her throat, not quite a reply, then said it without missing a beat.

"I could replace him. I can do what he did."

She smirked after. Like it was a joke.

My breath caught. I turned it into a cough.

She started humming again. The same tune from before. Like nothing had happened. I watched her profile. The way she moved through moments so easily—soft in her weirdness even around someone she barely knew.

"You seem really open," I said. "Like you're just yourself. Even around strangers."

She shrugged. "It's better for people to know I'm weird from the start."

I nodded. My hands were doing something—picking at my sleeve. I stopped them.

"I'd rather have people leave early because they think I'm weird," she added, "than fake it just to keep them around."

VI

The winter was getting closer. The sun appeared way less. It was all grey and depressing, which meant it was already late October.

Exams were closing in. Today was my initial psychiatrist appointment—finally. I didn't know what I was hoping for. Some explanation, maybe. Some word for why my brain worked the way it did. Or didn't work.

I'd just come from the appointment. The GP had handed over everything—my history, my file, my list of failed medications. The psychiatrist said several sessions would be needed. He suspected something. Another acronym I wouldn't understand. Mood disorder. Executive function. The only human words I grasped from his mouth.

I told him Escitalopram failed. Prozac I thought was it but meh—failed. Then Sertraline. The longest one I'd had without major sides. I'd been on it since summer, I think. The break-up triggered me. That time, I went to the GP for my cold. Then he noticed something on my wrist. Still remember the look. He immediately prescribed Escitalopram, then a referral for a psychologist. Or therapist. I forgot. I didn't have any expectations.

But it didn't take that long—not even a month before I was back, saying it wasn't working. Ironically, earlier this year, I tried to get a psychologist from the university's support. No luck. Same thing happened today. The psychiatrist noticed my wrist. Again. Always the medical professionals, huh.

"How did it lead to this?"

"Do you experience any suicidal ideation since taking it?"

"No."

I paused.

"I just felt too flat and numb. I just tried it because I wanted to try to feel?"

That's what I said. It sounded stupid out loud. But it was true.

He nodded like he'd heard it before. Then he told me there was another class of antidepressant called SNRI. Acronym again. I couldn't care less. Just mmhmm and yeah. Nodded as if I understood. He explained the differences between SSRIs and SNRIs. My brain couldn't process it. Is it going to shut the voices or not? That's the only thing I cared about.

Mood disorder, he kept saying. Like that explained anything.

So, *Desvenlafaxine this time. And exams were in three weeks.*

The timing felt almost funny, hastily. The first weeks are always the worst. Everyone knows that. Mood swings. Dissociation.

The leaflet sounded like a legal threat: may increase suicidal thoughts in the first few weeks, as if that made it easier to survive. Side effects are supposed to fade after four to six weeks. I read it anyway. I always do.

And I still tried.

Risk or not, I didn't feel like I had a choice. Stability started to feel like something other people were allowed to wait for. I wasn't. Luckily, I still had those pills from Chakra. Study drugs, he called them. I'd been using them too much recently. Used studying as an excuse. They shut the noise off.

Made my thoughts line up instead of clawing at each other. That brief sense of being functional—not happy, just usable. I didn't know why they worked when the antidepressants didn't. I didn't have a word for it. I just knew they helped.

I am not addicted. Right?

I didn't want euphoria. I didn't want escape. I just wanted that feeling back. I hoped, stupidly, that one day I'd get it the right way.

Through a doctor. Through a prescription. Through something that didn't make me feel like a criminal for trying to function. But today wasn't that day.

Today was just another diagnosis that didn't fit and another pill that probably wouldn't work.

The rain had gotten worse. By the time, I arrived at the SBE building. I was horribly drenched. Not that much, but enough to feel miserable.

"Porco dio," a familiar voice said behind me. "You should ask for a refund for that coat."

I glanced back. Giovanni.

One of my tutorial friends in the class I was heading to—the marketing one, not that horrible quant stuff. Actually one of the only people I talked to in the whole class.

Giovanni, I just knew, was chronically online. One time he showed up in a Zelda t-shirt. I saw him listening to Car Seat Headrest one day, then Bladee, then Yung Lean.

"You listen to Drain Gang?" I asked. Trying to connect.

"Uhm, actually," he said, "Yung Lean isn't Drain Gang."

Not long after, I saw his copy of Kafka's The Trial sticking out of his bag. I asked if it was good. "Is good," he said. "Should read." I don't know. I just felt like we'd experienced the same teenage years — pop culture wise, at least. except he'd also read the books and refused to talk about them like someone who had.

Then at some point I saw him at the movie club. It was nice seeing someone familiar in a group of strangers. But it still felt like your usual classmates. Not close. Not yet.

"Oh, Giovanni," I said.

"Well yeah, I'm a bit fucked," he replied. "Not a great way to welcome the usual Dutch weather. Should sue them for emotional damage or some shit."

Just his usual cheerful response. Yada yada yada.

"For group work," I continued, "I think we should meet sometime this week. Maybe grab coffee near the library?"

"Yeah, sounds good," he said. "I totally forgot we had to do that."

We head off to our class.

Later that night, I was still rotting in the library. Thursday night. 9 PM. When everyone else was going out.

My phone buzzed.

> ***Lieke:*** *Night out? There will be someone else from the university club too.*

Lieke. We'd met through a university club before the tutorial group. She was the president.

To worsen it, she was already engaged.

I hadn't even stepped into my life yet, and she had already mapped hers out.

I stared at the message for a minute, then typed back: Yeah, I'm in.

By the time I reached the club, it was packed. Thursday noise. Thursday bodies. Thursday lights that made everyone look slightly guilty.

I spotted Lieke first. Then I saw Giovanni in the corner.

Giovanni still had his bag on. Of course he did.

I pushed through the bodies and found them near the bar, pinned between a pillar and the spill of light from the fridge display.

Thursday nights in Maastricht always looked the same—sweaty jackets, loud laughter that didn't match anyone's eyes, bass thick enough to turn your organs into percussion.

Lieke saw me first. Her face did this tiny shift—relief that came too fast, like she'd been holding her breath without noticing.

I leaned in, raising my voice over the music. "Hey."

Lieke tapped my shoulder, nodded toward Giovanni. "Who's this?"

"Giovanni," I said. "Group work friend."

My eyes dropped to his bag. It looked absurd against the rest of him, like he'd walked in from a library and refused to update his reality.

"Are you actually serious?" I asked, mockingly. "Giovanni, you brought your laptop?"

He blinked at me, dead serious, like I'd asked if he brought his keys.

"Yeah," he said.

"Of course. You said we were meeting for group work."

His face didn't move. Not a smile. Not a smirk. Just that flat expression that made it impossible to tell if he was genuinely confused or fucking with me. I stared at the laptop bag like it had personally offended me. Giovanni paused for exactly three seconds, face still completely neutral.

"I'm just fucking with you," he said.

His expression didn't change at all. He could've been reading a phone book.

Lieke shook her head. "You're genuinely unwell," she said, barely audible under the bass, but she was smiling — that looked like she'd already decided to like him.

Giovanni took the bag off and set it down by his shoes, away from the sticky floor, away from everything. He kept his hand on the

strap for a beat longer than necessary, like letting go meant admitting something.

Then we just stood there, the three of us, half-crowded, half-alone.

We didn't talk about the assignment. Not properly. We tried for maybe thirty seconds, then it dissolved into the usual stuff—tutors who acted like they were doing us a favor by existing, deadlines that didn't care if you had a body, the PBL system that threw you into the sea. Lieke complained in that bright way she always did, cheerful like a defence mechanism.

"I swear, if one more tutor tells me to 'just figure it out,' I'm going to lose it."

Giovanni nodded, face blank. "Have you tried figuring it out?"

Lieke stared at him. I stared at him. His face stayed completely flat.

No hint of a smile. Nothing.

“Just fucking with you”

Still flat.

Lieke and I both cracked up—not because it was funny, but because his delivery was so deadpan it circled back around to hilarious.

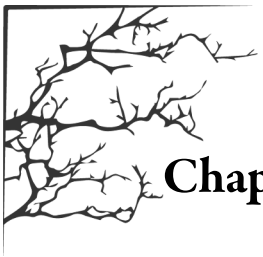
November ended quietly.

Exams loomed. Friends had been made—Giovanni, Lieke, closer bonds with Krzysztof and Juliette and Bunga. Chakra still sold me pills when I needed them, still checked in, still made jokes about the bus driver metaphor like it was funny instead of true.

I'd started the semester alone and angry. I was ending it... less alone. Still angry. Still medicated illegally. Still waiting for a diagnosis that might never clarify anything.

But I had people now. A routine. A city that felt slightly less foreign. Sofie's voice in my head had gotten quieter. Not gone—just less loud. The bus was still moving.

Winter was coming. And I was still here.



Chapter 2: Winter 2022

I

Exams were in a week. I had a backlog of material I couldn't focus on. The *dexies* helped. Study drugs, Chakra called them. I didn't know why they worked when the *Desvenlafaxine* didn't touch my focus. I just knew that when I took one, my thoughts stopped scattering. I could sit. I could read. I could function. I tried not to think about what that meant.

Two weeks on the *Desvenlafaxine*. The psychiatrist said four to six weeks for full effect. I was in the middle—past the worst of the initial side effects, supposedly, but not yet at whatever "stable" was supposed to feel like.

The Sertraline numbness was gone. That was true. But what replaced it wasn't peace. It was rawness. Emotions too close to the surface. I cried at nothing. Snapped at everything. The leaflet called this "adjustment."

Library lights went fluorescent-white and mean, like the place wanted to punish everyone for thinking they could become smarter in a week. Giovanni sat opposite me, pen tapping like a metronome, locked in — I thought. I glanced at his screen and caught him three threads deep in reddit. He saw me looking and tilted the laptop away, expression unchanged, like he'd been caught at nothing.

Lieke had her laptop open, tabs stacked like a collapsing shelf. Someone behind us cracked a pill bottle and tipped it into their palm, the sound sharp in the hush.

“Two week," Giovanni said, not looking at me. "Finance. We're finished."

Lieke tried to laugh, but her jaw was too tense.

"You only have one semester left, Lieke," I said. "Can't relate."

My phone buzzed.

Krzysztof: *Can't be fucked walking to Randwyck. Sorry.*

Giovanni leaned over, read it, and snorted. Lieke didn't react at first. Then she closed her laptop. Slow. Deliberate.

Across the table, Giovanni slid something between two fingers like it was a mint.

"Addy?" he asked.

He kept his voice low, polite, like he was offering help, like this was normal.

I stared at it.

"Nah," I said, even though my brain was screaming yes. Even though the exam questions were blurring together. "I've got my own."

Giovanni nodded once, deadpan, and pocketed it.

The wall clock kept snapping its second hand forward. I looked back at the question and still couldn't tell what it wanted from me. My jaw tightened.

I couldn't stop thinking about Ella.

Three weeks since the kebab date. We'd barely texted since—surface-level stuff. Nothing that told me if she was interested or just polite.

I unlocked my phone. Opened our chat. Stared at the last message I'd sent a week ago. She'd responded with "haha yeah."

One word and a yeah. Great.

I started typing.

Lynn: *hey! how are you? just wondering about that music that you sang to me*

Too eager. Three weeks ago. She'd think I was weird.

Deleted.

Lynn: *hey, there's a concert at muziekgieterij in late january. want to go?*

Too direct. What if she thought I was asking her on a date?

Deleted.

Giovanni looked up from his laptop. Saw my face.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked, flat.

"Nothing."

"You've been staring at your phone for ten minutes."

"I'm fine."

Lieke glanced over. "Is this about Ella?"

I looked up. "What? No."

"It's about Ella," Giovanni said to Lieke.

"How do you even—"

"You only make that face when you're overthinking something stupid," Giovanni said. "And the only stupid thing you overthink lately is Ella."

I sighed. Showed them the empty draft.

"I don't know what to text her. I don't want to be weird."

"Then don't be weird," Giovanni said.

"That's not helpful."

"Just ask her to the concert," Lieke said. "Simple."

"But what if—"

"You're overthinking it," Lieke cut in. "Just ask. Worst thing she can say is no."

I looked back at my phone. Started typing again.

Lynn: *hey, I know this is random, but are you free in late January? there's a concert at muziekgieterij. thought you might want to go*

I stared at it. My thumb hovered over send.

"Too wordy," Giovanni said, reading over my shoulder.

"It's fine," Lieke said.

"It's not fine. Cut the first part."

"Which part?"

"'I know this is random.' You don't need that."

He was right. I deleted it. Rewrote.

Lynn: *hey, are you free in late January? there's a concert at muziekgieterij. want to go?*

But I still couldn't send it.

"Send it," Lieke said.

"I will."

"You won't," Giovanni said.

"I will—"

He reached across the table and tapped send before I could stop him.

"What the fuck is wrong with you," I said.

"Shut up. Both of you," Lieke hissed, but she was smiling.

She'd already gone back to her laptop. Then looked up again, like she couldn't help herself.

"What happened?" she asked, not following her own advice.

"Giovanni just touched my phone—"

"Lynn's being a pussy," Giovanni said, face completely flat. "Too scared to ask Ella out."

"Wait, you're asking her out?" Lieke's eyes widened.

"I don't know if it's—" I started.

My phone buzzed.

We all looked at it.

Ella: *Yeah sure*

Ella: *Better than going alone*

I stared at the screen.

She said yes.

Giovanni grinned—an actual expression change, which was rare. "You look less dead."

"Fuck off," I said.

The next day, I was lying on my bed, staring at Ella's messages.

Ella: *yeah sure*
Ella: *better than going alone*

Two messages. That was it. She'd said yes, but she hadn't said anything else. No follow-up. No "I'm excited" or "sounds fun" or anything that told me if this was a date or just two people going to a concert because it's better than going alone.

I groaned and called Juliette.

She picked up on the second ring. "Hey."

"I need help," I said.

"With what?"

"Ella."

"Again?" She didn't sound annoyed. Just amused. "What happened this time?"

"I asked her to a concert. She said yes."

"Okay... so what's the problem?"

"I don't know what to say back."

There was a pause. Then Juliette laughed—not mean, just genuinely entertained.

"Lynn, you already asked her. She said yes. You don't need to say anything else."

"But I can't just leave it like that."

"Why not?"

"Because—" I stopped. I didn't know why. It just felt wrong. Incomplete. Like I needed to do more to make sure she knew I was interested.

"Lynn," Juliette said, softer now. "You're overthinking it."

"I know."

"Then stop."

"I don't know how."

"Okay," she said. "What did she say?"

I read Ella's messages out loud.

"'Better than going alone,'" Juliette repeated. "That's good, Lynn. She wants to go with you."

"But she didn't say—"

"She doesn't need to say anything else. She said yes. That's enough."

"But what if—"

"What if nothing," Juliette cut in. "You asked. She said yes. The concert is in like a month. You don't need to keep texting her between now and then unless something comes up."

I stared at my phone. At Ella's two short messages that I'd been analysing for the past hour.

"Don't worry," Juliette said, like she could hear my brain spiralling through the phone. "Be yourself. If you're nervous, you can even tell her that. I don't think that's a bad thing."

"Tell her I'm nervous?"

"Yeah. People like honesty."

I wasn't sure about that. But Juliette was usually right about these things.

"Okay," I said.

"Are you good now?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

"That's what I'm here for," she said. Like it was obvious. Like she didn't mind being the person I called every time I spiralled about a text message.

The next study session, Giovanni looked at me and said, deadpan, "You texted her again, didn't you?"

"No," I lied.

"Yes you did."

"I didn't—"

"You have that face. The face you make when you've overthought something and then did it anyway."

Lieke looked up from her notes. "Did you text her again?"

"I called Juliette," I admitted.

"Of course you did," Giovanni said.

He didn't sound judgmental. Just stating a fact.

"What did Juliette say?" Lieke asked.

"That I'm overthinking it."

"She's right," Giovanni said.

"I know. Doesn't help."

We went back to studying. But after a few minutes, Giovanni spoke again, still not looking up from his laptop.

"Lieke told me about the open mic thing."

I tensed. "What about it?"

"She said you read a poem. In Sanskrit."

"The title was Sanskrit. The poem was English."

"Same thing." He typed something. "Was it any good?"

I didn't know how to answer that. "People clapped."

"People clap at everything."

He paused typing. Looked up.

"Can I read it?"

The question landed differently than I expected. Not performative curiosity. Not the polite "oh that's cool" people say when they find out you write. He asked like he'd ask to borrow a pen.

"Maybe," I said.

"Cool." He went back to typing.

Then, "You know she's Belgian, right?"

"Yeah?" I said.

"Evil."

I looked up. "Evil? Why?"

“Eat mayo with fries and never say french fries."

"And Belgian drivers,” he added

Lieke snorted. "Gio, fuck off."

"No.”

I stared at him for a second, trying to figure out if he was serious or not. His face gave nothing away.

"That's it?" I asked. "Your warning? Mayo and drivers?"

"Yes."

II

Christmas was next week. The city would empty out, everyone going home to their families, their real homes, the places they belonged.

I'd stay here. Like always.

Too broke for a flight to Jakarta. Too estranged from my parents to want one anyway.

My phone buzzed on the floor next to me. I reached for it carefully, trying not to wake her.

***Chakra**: Oy!*
***Chakra**: Dinner at Krzys place Sunday*
***Chakra**: Bunga's off to Finland next week*
***Chakra**: I'm doing butter chicken*

I stared at the message.

Bunga was leaving next week, and I'd barely seen her since exams ended. Since I'd been wrapped up in Ella, in my own small world of coffee dates and poetry readings and learning how to be someone's partner.

***Lynn**: i'm in*
***Lynn**: i'll cook too*
***Chakra**: Shut up, u always late.*

I put my phone down and looked at Ella, still sleeping peacefully against me. The blankets on the floor. Her books scattered around us. The faint smell of tea and ramen, the feeling of something settling into place.

But also, Bunga leaving. Another empty seat.

Even when things were good, they didn't stay. I knew that.

For now, for this week, I'd show up. I'd cook butter chicken with Chakra. I'd be there for Bunga before she left.

And I'd deal with the empty seat later.

"Lynn, hurry the fuck-up."

"Wait, I'm still doing my makeup."

We were at Chakra's for pre-game, like we were trying to compress a whole friendship into one night before the timeline moved on without us.

I could hear him in the kitchen, doing his little rituals. The ones he swore were "for cooking." Sure.

Bunga laughed from the hallway, impatient in that way that meant she was already half-gone, mentally packing, already practicing being in a different country.

Chakra called something out, numbers and questions, his voice clipped with false calm. He always sounded like that when he cared.

Chakra being Chakra. He should've done pharmacy instead of business, honestly. He knew interactions, half-lives, the way one small decision could change the whole night. He read forums. He cross-checked. He warned you off things with the flat certainty of someone who'd seen the worst-case scenario play out in strangers.

"Save your wallet," he'd say, like money was the punchline, even when what he really meant was, don't make yourself the experiment.

He was the one who made sure we had water. The one who shoved gum into your hand without asking. Vitamins for the comedown. The quiet kind of care, the kind that looked like preparation.

He cared more than he let on. About everything. About us.

I put down my makeup. Looked at myself in the mirror like I was checking whether I still looked like me.

Bunga knocked again. I opened the door.

"Chill out."

She scanned my face the way people do when they're trying to make sure you're safe without saying the word safe.

"You're not on anything that'll mess with this, right?"

"No. Why?"

"Good." She looked relieved. "Just checking."

Chakra appeared behind her, already ready, palm out like an offering. "Water?"

I took it.

Outside, December bit through our jackets. *Landbouwbelang* wasn't far, ten minutes through *Boschstraatkwartier.* Past *Het Bassin* harbour. Along the *Maasboulevard.*

The city felt like it was holding its breath for Christmas.

We walked anyway.

Two degrees. Maybe three. Cold enough that my breath hung visible in the yellow streetlight. The cobblestones were wet, it had rained earlier, that fine mist that never really stops in December. Damp that clings to your skin, seeps through your jacket. The Maas was black. City lights reflected on the surface like something drowned.

I could hear distant bass already. A pulse under the city.

My jaw started to tighten.

"You feeling it?" Bunga asked.

"I don't know. Maybe."

Chakra walked ahead of us, hands in his jacket pockets. He'd taken less than us, I noticed. He always did. I didn't think about why.

We turned onto *Maasboulevard*. The venue appeared, a massive graffiti-covered warehouse, green tarp on one side, crumbling walls

on the other. A metal dragon sculpture guarded the entrance, like something pulled from a fairytale and welded into reality.

It looked like a place people made when they didn't fit anywhere else.

The bouncer nodded at Chakra, like they already shared a language. Chakra knew everyone. Or maybe everyone knew Chakra.

We walked in.

Inside was raw industrial. High ceilings. Steel trusses. Concrete floors. Graffiti on every surface, paint on paint, declarations layered until you couldn't tell what came first.

Wood stoves in the corners for heating. Not enough.

But I was warm. I was getting warmer.

The bass hit my chest before I processed it as sound. Not music exactly, more like pressure, like a second heartbeat that wasn't mine but wanted to be.

Strobes through smoke. Bodies moving. The smell of artificial fog, sweat, weed. My jaw was clenching now. I caught myself grinding my teeth.

Chakra appeared beside me. Didn't say anything. Just handed me a water bottle.

"Thanks."

He nodded. Scanned the room. Making sure we had space, making sure nobody got cornered, making sure—

I didn't think about what he was making sure of. I just let the bass take me.

Time stopped making sense. The night folded in on itself.

The music wasn't outside me anymore, it was in me, every kick drum running through my nervous system like a wire.

I loved everyone. I loved the strangers dancing next to me. I loved the DJ I'd never met. I loved the graffiti and the stupid strobe lights, and the fact that nobody asked me to explain myself.

So this is what it feels like when your body stops negotiating.

I found Bunga, or she found me. We were dancing together, then we were hugging, then we were just standing there holding each other while the room kept moving around us.

"I'm so glad we did this," she said into my ear.

"Me too."

Her cheek pressed against mine, warm and damp. I could feel her heartbeat through her jacket, the simplest proof that she was here, she was real, she wasn't gone yet.

Something in me reached for words like they could pin her in place.

"Bunga," I said, and my voice sounded like a confession. "I love you like an actual sibling. You're like the sister I should've had."

The sentence left my mouth and something older in me flinched, fast, involuntary, like a bruise you forgot you had. I didn't follow it.

I couldn't. Not here. Not tonight. Bunga pulled back to look at me. Her eyes were wet, or maybe that was the cold waiting outside.

"Thank you, lil sis." She hugged me tighter, like she could keep me from splintering. "Love ya too."

I meant it. I meant every word. The honesty was real. Not manufactured. Just unlocked. This kind of love was easy. Safe. I could give it without fear.

Romantic love was different.

Romantic love came with terms and conditions I never agreed to, and still somehow broke.

Chakra was nearby, not really dancing, more like holding his ground. His eyes were huge, his attention too sharp for someone who was meant to be lost in it. He kept watching the edges of the room instead of the center.

He was always handling it. Even when nobody asked him to.

At one point our eyes met. Just a second.

Smoking area. Outside along the quay, facing the Maas. The cold hit like a wall after the heat inside. Steam rose off our bodies. My breath was visible again, mixing with cigarette smoke.

"Fuck, it's freezing."

Bunga laughed. "You can't tell what you are right now."

She was right. I couldn't tell if I was hot or cold. Both. Neither. My skin felt like it belonged to someone else. The river was black. Lights reflected, the bridge in the distance, industrial cranes, old windows holding on to their last glow. Behind us, a wall layered with paint like a history nobody archived properly.

I lit a cigarette.

Bunga leaned on the railing, looking at the water.

"I'm really going to miss you," she said again, quieter this time, like she was testing whether it hurt to say it twice.

"It's not fair," I said. The words came out before I could soften them.

Nothing about leaving was fair. Nothing about staying either.

She bumped her shoulder into mine. "It's only six months"

Maybe. I was being dramatic. But some people leave for six months and you never get them back in the same shape. Chakra joined us. Lit a cigarette. Stared at the river like he was measuring the current.

"Are you good?" he asked me.

"Yeah." I wasn't sure if that was true. "Just... feeling a lot."

"That's the point."

We stood there in silence. Three people looking at black water, breath visible, bass still thumping from inside like a distant engine.

Chakra looked at me. His eyes were still huge, but there was something clear underneath.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing." He took a drag. "You just look like you're thinking too hard."

"I'm always thinking too hard."

"Yeah." He said it gently, like he wasn't accusing me of anything. "That's the problem."

I wanted to ask him what he did when the night ended. What he thought about when everyone else got to sleep. Why he always took care of everyone else but never seemed to let anyone take care of him.

But I didn't.

You don't ask Chakra questions like that. Not out loud.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go back in. It's freezing."

Back inside. The music had shifted, darker now, heavier, like the room had decided to stop pretending it was gentle.

Chakra was leaning against a pillar, eyes half-closed, somewhere between here and wherever his mind kept wandering.

I danced alone.

The warmth inside me started to thin out at the edges. That hollow, fragile feeling creeping in, the first announcement that the night had an expiry date.

But for now, I was still here. Still moving. Still feeling everything.

I thought about Ella. Don't ruin this one. The thought came unbidden. Clear and cold. Don't do what you always do. Don't take until there's nothing left. Don't— The bass dropped. The strobe cut through the smoke. Everyone around me was moving, alive, present.

5 a.m. The party was winding down.

We stumbled out into the cold. The sky was starting to lighten at the edges, not sunrise yet, but the promise of it.

Bunga walked between us, arms linked through ours.

"Best night," she said. "Seriously. Best night."

"It was good," Chakra agreed.

I didn't say anything. Just let myself be held between them, like if I stayed in the middle I wouldn't tip into anything else.

We got back to Chakra's apartment. Then he went to his room. Alone. I lay on the couch, staring at the ceiling. Bunga was already

asleep on the mattress, breathing softly. The warmth was gone. Just the hollow remained. I thought about Bunga. About Chakra. About how lucky I was to have people who cared. I thought about Ella again. About how easy it would be to ruin everything.

III

Sunday came too fast.

I showed up at Krzysztof's apartment at six, arms full of grocery bags I couldn't really afford. Tomatoes, cream, chicken thighs, garam masala, which I'd actually remembered this time. Chakra had texted a list with detailed instructions, like I'd never made this before.

Chakra: *Dont forget kasuri methi*
Lynn: *got it*
Chakra: *U forgot last time lmao*
Lynn: *not this time i swear*
Chakra: *"i swear"*

Chakra was already there, unpacking ingredients, taking over Krzysztof's kitchen like he owned it. Bunga sat on the counter, legs swinging, watching him work with that amused expression she got when Chakra was being Chakra.

"You're late," Chakra said without looking up.

"I'm five minutes late."

"Still."

"Traffic."

"You don't have a car."

"Bus traffic."

Bunga laughed, that bright sound that meant she was genuinely delighted. "She's got you there."

I set the bags down and started unpacking. The familiar ritual.

Krzysztof emerged from his room, hair still wet from a shower, moving carefully like someone who'd just gotten out of the hospital and was still figuring out how to exist in normal space again.

"Hey," he said quietly.

"Hey." I looked at him properly for the first time in weeks. "You look good."

"I look medicated."

"Same thing."

He smiled. Small, but real. "Yeah. I guess it is."

We fell into the rhythm without needing to discuss it. Chakra directed operations like a general. I chopped onions. Bunga measured spices. Krzysztof set the table, moving slowly but steadily, each task a small victory.

"So Finland," Chakra said, stirring onions in the pan. "Six months."

"Five months and three weeks," Bunga corrected. "But who's counting."

"Why out of every destination, it's Finland? Isn't your family there now?" I asked.

"I always wonder how's the university there. I'm basically finished the whole twelve years in Jakarta." Bunga gave me that look that said my question was stupider than I realised.

The chicken went in. The smell filled the apartment—rich, warm, almost like home but not quite. Close enough.

I remembered the first time we'd made this. Last year, all of us broke and high and trying to figure out how to survive a Dutch winter. Chakra insisting he knew what he was doing. Bunga laughing at everything. Krzysztof so anxious he kept asking if we were doing it right.

Now we moved around each other with practiced ease. Like we'd done this a hundred times. Like we'd keep doing it forever.

Except we wouldn't.

Because Bunga was leaving.

I watched Chakra cook. He moved through the kitchen like he'd memorised it—reaching for spices without looking, adjusting heat

by sound. His hands worked fast, almost aggressive. Onions into oil. Garlic crushed with the flat of the blade.

At some point, he nicked his finger. Not deep, but enough to bleed. He didn't stop. Just wiped it on his jeans and kept chopping, kept stirring, kept his eyes on the pot like looking away would break something.

His focus was off. Not the usual Chakra ease. More like if he stopped moving, he'd have to feel something he would rather not feel. I recognised it. I did the same thing when my brain got too loud.

But I didn't say anything. Chakra didn't like being seen when he was like this. So I chopped my onions and pretended I hadn't noticed.

Krzysztof pulled out mismatched plates. We didn't have enough for everyone, so we ate straight from the pot, standing in the kitchen, elbows touching.

"Remember last year?" Krzysztof said. "When we accidentally made it an edible?"

"Nah, we didn't forget," Chakra said. "We were trying to make it more fun."

Bunga sat on the counter, legs swinging. "Butter chicken as an edible. Genius move."

Krzysztof pointed his spoon at Juliette.

"That time—"

The memory hit before he finished the sentence.

Last year, we'd accidentally made butter chicken edibles. Not "a little weed." Not "cute amount." Enough to turn dinner into a bad trip.

Bunga had stared at the tiles like they were moving. I'd been stuck on the sofa, perfectly placed between Bunga and Chakra, like I was meant to supervise them. Which was funny because I couldn't move either. My body felt glued to the cushions.

Krzysztof ate the most, obviously. He'd stood up and then just stayed standing, rigid, like he was doing a plank against the air. A few minutes later, he started vomiting. Non-stop. Like his body had decided the only solution was to eject the entire night.

I was too stoned to help. I was barely a person. My stomach made a loud, traitorous noise, and then I was puking too, leaning over the bin like it had personally offended me.

Juliette had just stood there, frozen, watching it happen with the calm of a Stonehenge statue.

"Hey," Juliette cut in, back in the kitchen, back in the present.

She looked at me, deadpan.

"Lynn was puking like a Merlion," she said.

We laughed. The sound filled the small space, warm and alive, and for a second the room didn't know how to hold anything else.

More people kept arriving. No one asked why. Easier to fill the apartment than to name what was coming.

I found myself in the corner with Bunga, both of us watching the chaos.

"You're going to be okay," she said quietly.

"Everyone keeps saying that."

"Because it's true."

"Or because you're all trying to convince yourselves."

She turned to face me. "Lynn. Look at me."

I did.

"You have people here."

"What if it's not enough?"

"What if it is?"

I wanted to believe her.

"I'm scared," I admitted. "That you'll leave and everything will fall apart."

"It won't fall apart."

"How do you know?"

"Because you're still here." She grabbed my hand. "Eight times, Lynn. Eight times you tried to leave and you're still here. That's not weakness. That's the stubbornest thing I've ever seen."

"Or the stupidest."

"Same thing." She squeezed my hand. "And I'm not disappearing. I'm going to Finland. Different country, same time zone basically. I'll still answer your 2 AM existential crisis texts."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

People started leaving around eleven. The apartment emptied slowly, like air leaking from a balloon.

Chakra helped Krzysztof clean up. I dried dishes while Bunga put away leftovers.

"You want to take some?" she asked.

"Yeah."

She packed a container for me. Extra, as she always did.

"For tomorrow," she said. "When you're sad and don't want to cook."

"I'm not going to be sad."

"You're going to be sad."

She wasn't wrong.

Chakra left around midnight, clasping my shoulder on the way out.

"Take care of yourself."

"The fuck you mean by that? What's so sudden—you become wise now?"

He flipped me off. "Is it gay for me to care about my friend?"

"Dude." I looked at him properly. "You seem off tonight."

Something flickered across his face. Then it was gone—the easy grin back, that *don't worry about me* energy he always wore.

"Look, it's alright. Just take care. I mean it."

He said it twice. I noticed but didn't push.

"I know."

He nodded once, pulled his jacket tighter, and walked out into the cold.

I almost called after him. Almost asked what was actually wrong. But the door was already closing, and I told myself I'd text him tomorrow.

I didn't.

Then it was just me, Bunga, and Krzysztof. The three of us standing in the cleaned kitchen, surrounded by the smell of spices and the weight of an ending.

"I should go," Bunga said.

"Yeah."

We stood there for a moment, none of us moving.

"Group hug?" Krzysztof suggested.

"Absolutely not," Bunga said.

We group hugged anyway.

Tight and long and warm, the three of us holding on to each other like we could stop time if we just didn't let go.

Eventually we did.

Bunga grabbed her coat. I grabbed the leftovers.

We walked out together, down the stairs, into the cold December night.

At the bike racks, we stopped.

"This is it," she said.

"This is it."

"Call me when you get home?"

"It's a ten minute walk."

"Call me anyway."

"Okay."

She hugged me one more time. I breathed in her perfume—something floral and expensive she definitely shoplifted—and tried to memorise it.

"You're going to be okay," she whispered.

"You too."

"I know."

She got on her bike. Waved. Rode off into the darkness.

I stood there watching until I couldn't see her anymore.

Then I walked home through the empty streets of Maastricht, holding my container of butter chicken, trying not to cry.

Exchange programmes always sounded temporary until they weren't. Until people came back different. Or didn't come back at all.

Three days later, Bunga left for the exchange. Her family was already there, so she'd tried to get back before Christmas.

I walked her to the train station with Chakra. She had one suitcase and a backpack that looked too light for a whole semester.

At the platform, Chakra hugged Bunga first.

It wasn't his usual hug—the quick back-pat, the performative casualness. This one lasted. His arms wrapped around her fully, and I saw his shoulders drop, like he was letting go of something he'd been carrying.

He whispered something into her hair. I couldn't hear it. Didn't try to.

Bunga's face changed. Her eyes got softer, sadder. She patted his back the way you pat someone who's trying not to cry.

"I know," she said quietly. "I know."

When they pulled apart, Chakra's face was normal again. Easy grin. Relaxed posture. Back in place so fast I almost doubted what I'd seen.

But Bunga looked at me over his shoulder, and something in her expression made my chest tight.

What did he tell her?

I didn't ask. It felt like something I wasn't supposed to see.

I handed her a bag of snacks. Nothing fancy.

Bunga hugged me last.

"Don't disappear," she said into my shoulder.

"I won't," I said, and meant *I'll try*.

She waved through the train window until it pulled away. We stood there watching the street fill back in around the gap she left, as it always did.

Another one gets off the bus. Is it temporary or permanent? Will she still recognise the Lynn who exists six months from now? Will I still recognise her?

It was the first snow of the year. I looked up, watched the flakes falling. The first time I'd seen snow in my life. The first time I felt heavy for a departure.

IV

As usual, I was late. I ran, breath visible in the cold air, not drenched in sweat, just flushed from the effort. January in Maastricht wasn't cute winter—it was real winter, biting your face, killing your fingers even inside your pockets.

Before meeting Ella, I took half a *dex*. Not to get high. Just to be present. The *Desvenlafaxine made me feel things again, but it also made me scattered, reactive. The study drugs smoothed it out. Made me someone who could hold a conversation without my brain jumping to twelve different places.*

I didn't know if that was cheating. Being medicated into a better version of myself. But Ella seemed to like the version of me that showed up on those days. So I kept doing it.

The concert was at Muziekgieterij, tucked near the river. Indie venue, small room, people who actually listened. You could feel the bass in your ribs before you even got inside.

Ella was already in line. Red hair catching the streetlight, eyeliner sharp even in the cold, that unreadable expression she always wore like it was default.

I spotted her instantly. Same red hair, but this time she was wearing new Doc Martens. The ones she'd mentioned wanting last time we talked.

Chakra had helped me pick my outfit that night. Something different from what I usually wore—I don't even remember exactly what he said, just that I listened. He cared about stuff like that more than I did.

I noticed her boots. She'd mentioned them last time.

"Did you finally get the Doc Martens?" I asked. "You said you wanted them, right?"

"Yup!" She showed them off like they were a trophy. "They were on discount too."

My eyes caught on the little digital camera she was holding. Cheap. Plastic. Almost looked like a toy.

"You actually use that?" I asked, half-teasing.

She grinned. "Yeah, why?"

"I mean... it looks fake."

She gasped dramatically. "Wow. You're a camera snob."

"I'm not—" I scoffed. "I just use an actual analog camera."

Her eyes lit up. "No way. Let me try it."

I handed it over. She held it up, aimed, clicked. Flash.

"Alright, your turn," she said, handing it back.

I snapped one of her too. A photo of me. A photo of her. Tiny moments, frozen.

Chakra and his girlfriend passed by in line. I waved. Chakra gave a small nod. His girlfriend smiled briefly, then turned back to their conversation. They had their own world. I didn't expect them to pause for mine.

Ella leaned closer, lowered her voice.

"So... what's the tea with them?"

"It's complicated," I shrugged. "He's one of my close friends. They've been on and off for years."

She smirked but didn't push. Instead, we started talking about exes. My infamously trauma-dump starter pack.

"One and a half years," I said. "Longest I've been in a relationship."

"No way," she said.

"Moved abroad together. Indonesia to the Netherlands. Lasted less than six months after we moved."

"That's crazy."

I laughed. "It is, isn't it?"

We both laughed.

"What about you?" I asked.

She sighed. "Mine ended because I didn't want to be in a situationship."

I nodded. "Fair."

Then she tilted her head, eyes narrowing a little, like she was trying to read me deeper.

"Are you trying to find one now?" she asked.

I paused. Thought about it.

"I don't know."

"How about you?"

"Not really sure. I'm happy as I am right now." She smiled.

I felt something shift in my chest. Her smile made me like her more. And that scared me.

Time passed faster than I expected. One minute we were just talking, and the next, the line outside the venue had nearly disappeared.

She checked her phone. "We should head in."

We walked in together. The venue was dim and warm despite the cold outside, the crowd already pulsing toward the stage.

We found our spot near the back. After a while, we decided to grab a drink.

Near the bar was the merch booth. She saw it immediately. Her eyes flicked toward the sweatshirts. She hesitated. You could see the internal debate on her face—Do I want this? Can I justify this?

"As a business student," I said sarcastically, "I'd say that's a great financial decision—which is not financial advice."

"Ughhhhh, is it?" she groaned.

"Should I? Should I? Should I?" she hovered.

Then she picked one up. Bought it.

I laughed. "It's actually not a good financial decision, though."

She wasn't mad. Just laughed with me. Said it was dumb to buy a sweatshirt in winter when she already had a jacket, but at least she could hang it on her wall like a poster.

We went back to our spot. Somewhere in the middle of talking, she noticed the scar on my right arm.

"Sorry if I may ask—what happened to this?"

"Oh," I said casually, "it's a cancer biopsy. From when I first moved here. Turned out to be false. One of the craziest weeks of my life."

She paused, then asked, "So... anything else crazy ever happen to you?"

"Me?" I thought for a second. "Probably moving to the Netherlands for my ex. That was kind of stupid."

I looked at her. "You?"

She smiled. "Just a normal kid. Belgium to here. Which was... pretty recent."

I nodded, and then without meaning to, I said, "I keep remembering people through things they gave me. Like this necklace—my ex gave it to me. And my bracelet—my sister, right before she..."

I trailed off. It was getting too heavy.

Ella looked at me for a moment, then said quietly, "Maybe you're not ready to let go yet."

I didn't know how to respond to that.

"Have you ever wanted to be onstage? Like this?" I asked, changing the subject.

"Yeah," she said. "Actually, I was in a band in high school."

We kept talking. Slowly, naturally. The way people do when they don't want the night to end.

Then the lights dimmed. The opener started. We rushed forward, slipping through the gaps in the crowd until we were closer to the front.

When the band played Regent's Park, I looked at her.

She was smiling. Softly. Completely in it.

And I just... watched her.

That song was one Sofie introduced me to. It used to hurt hearing it. I used to reach for my necklace every time it played—like some quiet ritual to remember her.

But not tonight.

Tonight I was just... here. Listening. Watching Ella listen. Talking to her. Existing with her.

For the first time in a long time, I wasn't stuck in the past. I wasn't replaying endings. I wasn't holding on.

I was just seeing her.

My eyes stayed locked a little too long. She suddenly turned, caught me looking.

I glanced away, pretending to study the lights. Or the ceiling. Anything else.

But when I finally looked back, she was smiling.

We didn't talk much after the concert.

Too many people. The crowd pushing out in all directions. Lights too bright, ears still ringing.

She didn't say much either. Just smiled. Walked beside me.

We ended up outside the venue. The air was freezing now. Maastricht winter pretending to have mercy, but not really.

We stood there for a second, both not sure what to say. I think we were both waiting for the other to end the night first.

"I'll see you soon?" she asked. Half-statement, half-question.

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, for sure."

She stepped forward. Arms open.

We hugged. Not too long. Not too short. Just enough to feel real.

Her arms wrapped around me lightly. Mine around her. The cold made it feel closer somehow, like we were sharing warmth for just a second.

And then she let go first.

"Get home safe," she said, smiling again—that soft smile she always wore, the one that made you feel like maybe you weren't that hard to love after all.

Then she turned and walked away.

I stood there for a moment, watching her red hair disappear into the crowd moving toward the bridge. The cold bit at my face. My fingers were numb. But I didn't move yet.

In that moment, I was just standing outside Muziekgieterij, watching Ella walk away, thinking maybe—maybe—this was the start of something.

V

***Lynn**: hey. doing anything over new year?*
***Lynn**: r u in maasi rn?*
***Ella**: No. Im at my parents.*
***Ella**: No difference though. Liege was not even an hour away lol.*
***Lynn**: im still thinking about that night*
***Lynn**: i just enjoyed spending time with you*
***Ella**: Me too*
***Ella**: I love spending time with you too.*
***Lynn**: do you want to go to the christmas market with me?*

***Lynn**: the one in aachen tomorrow*
***Ella**: Yah. For sure ⍰*

Aachen was cold in the way that made your face hurt. The Christmas market was crowded — mulled wine, roasted nuts, tourists taking photos of lights they'd forget by February. We walked through it together. Close. Not holding hands yet, but close enough that our sleeves kept brushing.

"How are you?" Ella asked.

I froze. Three words. The same three words Sofie used to ask. The same three words I answered with "I want to die" until she hollowed out from carrying it.

No. You are not her.

A snowflake landed on my shoulder. I watched it melt.

I could hide. I was good at hiding. I hid from Sofie for months — performed "fine" until the performance collapsed. I couldn't do that again.

"Ella," I said. Soft voice.

She looked at me. Patient. Not pushing.

"I just need to tell you something."

"Okay."

"I know this is too early." I hesitated. "Maybe it's weird to say this now. But I'd rather you know."

I rolled up my sleeve.

The scars were old. Healed. Pink lines that didn't hurt anymore, at least not physically.

"I'm in a good pathway," I said quickly. "And this is about my own self, not anyone else. Not you. I just — I didn't want to hide it."

“Look” I said

“I’m medicated, and on a weekly appointment. I swear”

I looked at her eyes. Waiting for the flinch. The concern that's really fear. The moment she'd start calculating how to leave without being cruel.

She didn't flinch.

"That's fine," she said.

"Cool for me."

That was it. No performance. No panic. No "are you okay, do you need to talk about it, should I be worried?"

Just: *Cool for me.*

I pulled my sleeve back down.

Later, walking through the market, I thought about what I'd done.

Part of me felt like I'd trauma-dumped. Like I was one of those people who unload their shit on anyone who gets close, making their pain everyone else's problem. I'd had friends like that. I'd *been* that friend, with Sofie. Taking and taking until she couldn't give anymore.

But this felt different.

I wasn't asking Ella to carry anything. I wasn't making her responsible for my scars. I was just... showing her. Giving her the information. Letting her decide if she wanted to stay. Sofie never got that choice. I hid until I couldn't hide anymore, and by then she was already in too deep. Already invested. Already loving someone who was drowning and dragging her down.

This time, I showed Ella the drowning *first*. Before she invested too much. Before I took too much. If she wanted to leave, she could leave.

She just said: *Cool for me.*

And kept walking beside me through the Christmas market, close enough that our sleeves kept brushing, like nothing had changed. Maybe nothing had.

Or maybe everything had, and I just couldn't feel it yet.

VI

Three weeks since the concert. Three weeks of coffee dates. Three weeks of carefully timing my medication so I'd be functional when I saw her — *Desvenlafaxine* in the morning because the doctor said so, half a *dex* before dates because it actually helped. I was building something with chemical scaffolding. I tried not to think about what would happen if the scaffolding collapsed.

Ella walked beside me through the Sunday market crowd, close enough that our sleeves brushed.

Earlier this month, I'd gone to that concert with her. First proper date. We'd taken photos with our cameras, talked about exes, hugged goodbye. And then I'd woken up the next morning thinking about her, which scared me more than it should have.

Since then, we'd been doing this—coffee twice a week, always at the same place near the river. Long walks when the weather wasn't actively hostile. Texting daily about memes, song lyrics, observations about how Maastricht managed to be both beautiful and depressing.

We hadn't defined it yet. But it felt like something.

Today I'd asked her to come to the market, and it took more courage than it should've. A normal invite. A normal date thing. But my brain treated it like a risk assessment.

Because I had a pattern. And the pattern was: I hurt people who love me.

The first one barely counted. Year 8. Four months. I couldn't even call it love—just two kids who didn't know what they were doing. But I remember being so scared of doing something wrong that I did nothing at all. Convinced myself she was using me as a rebound. My friend's ex. Easier to believe that than risk being vulnerable.

I was an asshole because I was afraid. That's not an excuse. It's just true.

The second one broke something in me. Year 10. I loved her—actually loved her. Wrote her letters that make me cringe now, but I meant every word at the time.

And then I ran.

Every small fight, I disappeared. Every difficult conversation, I shut down. I couldn't communicate what I felt because I was terrified of the outcome. So I just... stopped. Ignored her messages. Avoided her in the halls. Let the relationship rot instead of facing it.

She was traumatised. Couldn't be in a relationship for years after me.

I found out later, through mutual friends. And I carried that guilt for so long—until I heard she'd found someone new. Someone who didn't run. Someone who stayed.

I was relieved. Not for me. For her. That she'd healed despite what I did.

And then there was Sofie.

A year ago, we shared a bed. Same apartment. Same city. Same country. Every second spent together, her hand in mine. She used to ask "How are you?" and actually wait for the answer. She held me through every breakdown, every spiral, every time I said "I want to die" and meant it.

She gave until there was nothing left to give.

And I took.

When she was finally the one who was low—when she needed me for once—I wasn't there. I was so deep in my own shit that I couldn't see her drowning. I remember laughing at something she said. I don't remember what. It wasn't funny. But I laughed anyway.

Then she woke up one night and found me in the kitchen. Saw what I'd done to myself. And I watched the light go out of her eyes—not all at once, but slowly, like a candle burning down.

I did that. Not the depression. Not the medication. Me.

When she emailed me months later, she said I'd changed. That she didn't recognise me anymore. That she missed who I used to be.

She was right.

Now she's in a different bed. Different city. Different country. Different time. Someone else's hand in hers.

And I'm here. Alone. Holding cigarettes. Wondering if I'll do the same thing to the next person who makes the mistake of loving me.

What if I did the same thing to Ella?

I didn't belong to anyone. All the people I'd hurt. The pattern I couldn't seem to break. And now I was here with Ella, pretending I wouldn't do the same thing.

A few days earlier she'd caught me writing. Not in a dramatic way. Just walked in at the wrong time, saw the notebook open, saw my hand moving like it was doing something illegal.

We weren't living together yet—that would come later, at the end of the month when her lease ran out. But we'd fallen into a pattern. Her showing up at my place after classes. Me making tea badly. Both of us reading on my couch until one of us fell asleep.

She read a few lines of my poem before I could snatch it away. I watched her face, waiting for a verdict. Waiting for her to see what was underneath. The darkness. The obsession with loss and hurt and things that don't heal properly.

But Ella looked intrigued, like the poem was a little creature she wanted to cup gently in her hands. Sofie never read my poetry. I'd never shown her. Never trusted her with that part of me.

Maybe that was the problem. Maybe I'd kept the real me locked away, and she'd loved a version that didn't exist.

So when we passed the little park stage and saw the chalk sign that said OPEN MIC POETRY, Ella stopped walking like it was an obvious invitation.

"Lynn," she said, all optimism. "You should read one."

I let out a laugh that wasn't a laugh. More like air escaping.

"I don't think it's safe for all ages," I said, glancing at the families nearby. A kid ran past us holding a sugared waffle like it was a trophy.

Ella blinked at me, waiting.

"Look," I said, and I hated how defensive I sounded. "I self-acknowledge I write edgy stuff."

Dark stuff. Emo—stuff that made me look like I was still stuck in teenage angst.

Ella just stared. Not judgmental. Not amused. Just steady.

Then she tilted her head, pulling the right memory out of a drawer.

"Not the one you showed me," she said. "Wasn't that one about a bird?"

Fuck. Because she said it like she'd actually listened. Like she'd kept it. Like the poem mattered enough to stay in her head.

And how was I supposed to say no to Ella when she was looking at me like that?

I don't know how she managed to make me do it.

Now I'm sitting on the edge of a low concrete step, waiting for my turn like I'm waiting for a sentence. The park smells like wet grass and coffee. People keep arriving in small clusters, carrying tote bags and confidence.

Ella sits beside me, vibrating with excitement, knees bouncing, eyes on the stage like she's about to watch a concert. Every time I look at her, she's looking back. Like she's proud already. Like the outcome is guaranteed.

It makes my chest feel tight in the stupidest way.

She doesn't know yet, I think. *She doesn't know what I did to Sofie.*

She doesn't know I made someone who loved me hollow. That I took until there was nothing left to take. That when Sofie finally needed me, I laughed. She doesn't know I'm capable of quiet cruelty—of being so consumed by my own pain that I can't see anyone else drowning.

I try to rehearse the poem in my head and it slips away every time I touch it, like soap. I tell myself I can still back out, and then I don't.

The sign-up list moves. Names get called. Someone reads something funny and the crowd laughs in the polite, safe way people laugh when they want to be kind.

Then my name gets said.

My body reacts before my brain does. I stand up. My hands feel too light. My legs feel wrong, like I'm borrowing them. I walk to the front, and the path feels longer than it should because everyone's faces blur into one soft wall of attention.

I can't look at them. I look for Ella instead.

She's right there. Eyes bright. Smiling like she's watching something brave, not something dangerous.

If she knew. If she knew what I'm capable of.

I inhale. Or I try to. It catches halfway.

"I, um..."

My voice comes out smaller than it sounded in my head.

I grip the paper like it can hold me upright.

"Pinjara," I say.

Silence.

Immediately, I panic.

"It means... a cage in sanskrit," I add,

I start reading.

The poem is simple. Short. One of the most cliché things I've ever written, and I picked it anyway because it felt safer than anything sharp. My voice trembles through the lines. I lose my place once and pretend I didn't. I rush the ending like I'm trying to escape it. The seconds after feel unreal. Like the air changes texture. Like I'm back in my body and I don't know how I got there.

People clap. Not loudly, but enough.

I walk back to my seat too fast, heart punching at my ribs, face hot even though the wind is cold.

Ella's grin turns into something softer, like she's trying not to overwhelm me with her happiness.

She leans close, shoulder brushing mine, and doesn't say "I told you so."

Thank God.

A moment later, an older Asian lady approaches me with the careful smile of someone who's lived long enough to recognise what kind of pain hides in metaphors.

"I liked that," she says, nodding. "It reminded me of Asian parenting."

I manage to smile. To say thank you.

By the time the older lady walked away, the air had cooled. The park lights looked tired. People started packing up their chairs like the evening had an expiry date.

I started walking home.

Ella walked beside me, close enough that our shoulders almost touched, but not quite. I couldn't tell if that was accidental or a choice. The closer I got to her, the more distance I noticed—learning her in reverse. She doesn't know yet, I thought.

I read people the way other people breathe. Not because I'm gifted. Because I had to be. I learned meaning in micro-signals—faces, pauses, tone—the moment before someone snaps, the moment before they leave. I could tell when someone was about to hurt me. I could tell when someone was about to disappear.

I learned what faces meant. What pauses meant. What jokes were actually warnings. If I could read them, I could perform, become the version of me they'd tolerate. But it also meant I knew exactly when I was hurting someone.

With Sofie, I'd seen it. Every time. The way her shoulders dropped when I made everything about me. The way she went quiet after I dismissed something she cared about. The way she looked at

me sometimes—not angry, just tired. Like loving me was work she couldn't afford but kept paying anyway.

I saw it, and I didn't stop.

That's the part I can't forgive. It wasn't ignorance. It was knowing and doing it anyway, because my pain felt bigger than hers. Because I was drowning and couldn't see that she was drowning too.

Until she wasn't anymore. Until she went still and quiet and I realised I'd hollowed her out.

The problem was Ella didn't give me the usual cues.

With most people, it's easy. I read the room, read the group, pick the mask that fits, and wear it until the night ends.

But since I started seeing Ella, I kept failing the first step.

I couldn't find the mask.

And eventually I just gave up.

Literally. Fuck it.

Maybe that's the problem, I thought. Maybe the mask was protecting her. Maybe she needs to see the version of me that performs, not the version that drains people dry.

Ella looked at me and squinted slightly, like I was too bright, or like she was trying to focus on the part of me that wasn't performing.

Her mouth stayed soft, almost amused, but her eyes didn't match it. It wasn't suspicion. It was attention.

That scared me more.

She moved closer. Close enough that I could feel her hairbrush my shoulder, warm and light, weightless. Usually I can read people, especially when they're into me. Usually there's flirting. Obvious signals. Little rehearsed steps people do when they want you to follow.

With Ella, it was different. She barely flirted. But her cues didn't feel like mixed messages. They felt like she was staying. For now, I thought. Until she sees what I really am.

Slowly, I reached for her hand.

My fingers found hers, uncertain, asking permission from the air. I slid my thumb over her knuckles, testing, waiting for her to pull away. Waiting for the moment I'd have to play it off.

What if I do to her what I did to Sofie?

She laced her fingers through mine like it was the most normal thing in the world.

And just like that, it happened. The first time we held hands.

I didn't know what to do with something that easy.

Nothing stays easy. Not with me.

Sofie thought it was easy too, at first.

Before, Ella used to be a chatterbox, or at least that's what I told myself so I wouldn't have to notice the pattern. Every time something turned romantic, she went quiet. Comfortable quiet. Not the silence that means someone's already leaving.

My head stayed loud anyway.

Like there was another version of me in there, still narrating, still scanning, still trying to solve her like she was a test I could pass if I concentrated hard enough.

Or maybe I'm just waiting. Waiting for the moment I hurt her like I hurt Sofie.

Waiting for the light to go out of her eyes the way it did with Sofie. Slowly. So gradually I won't notice until it's gone.

But out here, walking, fingers threaded together, I didn't need words to exist.

That was the problem.

Ella was unreadable. A page torn mid-sentence while the ink was still wet. I kept reaching for the rest of it and finding air. No cues. No easy answer. Just her hand, warm in mine, like she trusted me with it without thinking.

She shouldn't. Sofie trusted me too.

And in the quiet, with her thumb brushing my knuckle like it meant nothing, one question kept pulsing behind my teeth.

What are we right now?

I didn't ask. I was too scared of the answer.

Maybe if I didn't name it, it couldn't end yet. Maybe if I didn't let her get too close, I wouldn't drain her the way I drained Sofie. Maybe if I was careful enough, I wouldn't make another person hollow.

I squeezed Ella's hand tighter. Not to hold on.

To remind myself: *Don't do to her what you did to Sofie.*

Don't take until there's nothing left. Don't laugh when she's drowning. But I didn't know if I could control it. I didn't know if I was already taking. Already draining. Already hurting her without meaning to.

VII

Six weeks on the *Desvenlafaxine*. Follow-up appointment.

The waiting room smelled like every medical waiting room. Cleaning products and recycled air and the particular silence of people trying not to look sick.

The receptionist called my name. The psychiatrist's office looked the same. He was already typing when I walked in.

"So," he said, not looking up. "How are we doing on the *Desvenlafaxine*?"

"Better than the Sertraline," I said. "I can feel things again. But I still can't focus. I can't study. I sit down to read and my brain just—" I made a gesture like something scattering. "Goes everywhere. I can't hold on to a thought."

"The concentration issues are common with depression," he said. "Once your mood stabilises fully, the cognitive symptoms usually improve."

I wanted to say: *But what if that's not it? What if there's something else?* But I didn't know what "something else" would be. I didn't have words for it. I just knew the antidepressants weren't fixing the part that felt most broken.

"I see you're still using cannabis," he said, glancing at his screen.

"It's legal here."

"Legal doesn't mean it isn't affecting your cognition." He looked at me then. "Cannabis can cause concentration problems. Memory issues. Executive dysfunction. It can also interfere with how antidepressants work."

Executive dysfunction. He kept using that phrase. Like it was a side effect of weed. Like it was something I was doing to myself.

I thought about the study drugs. How they made my brain quiet. How I could actually focus when I took them—not hyper-focused, not manic, just... functional. Normal.

But I already knew how it would sound. *The antidepressants aren't enough so I'm buying study drugs from a friend.* He'd write something in my file. Drug-seeking. Self-medicating. Another box to put me in.

"The mood disorder diagnosis," he continued. "I think that's still the right framework. Your mood has improved on the *Desvenlafaxine*, yes?"

"I guess. I'm not numb anymore."

"That's progress." He typed something. "Let's stay the course. Same dosage. If you're still struggling with focus in a few months, we can consider adding something for concentration. But let's see if the mood stabilisation helps first."

A few months. Always a few more months.

"The cannabis," he added. "I'd strongly recommend reducing your use. It's likely contributing to the cognitive symptoms you're describing."

I nodded. I didn't argue.

"Any other concerns?"

I had a hundred concerns. I didn't know how to say any of them. I didn't have the vocabulary for what was wrong with me. I just knew that "mood disorder" didn't cover it. That antidepressants weren't the answer. That something was missing and no one was looking for it.

"No," I said. "That's everything."

Same prescription. Same diagnosis. Same feeling of being translated into a language I didn't speak.

The system wasn't going to help me.

"See you in June."

I stood. Smiled. Said thank you like a good patient. And left.

The hallway stretched longer on the way out. My hands were steady—too steady, the kind of steady that comes before breaking. At the elevator, the receptionist smiled. "See you in three months!" Bright. Cheerful. As though I hadn't just been called an addict for trying to survive.

I made it to the elevator before I couldn't breathe. Not panic attack breathing. Just—nothing. As though my lungs forgot their job. The doors opened. I got in. Watched the floor numbers light up.

Ground floor.

Outside, early March pretended to be spring. The trees had started budding, then stopped. Frost warnings every other morning. The city couldn't decide what season it was trying to be.

Neither could I.

I lit a cigarette even though my hands were shaking. He called me an addict.

I checked my phone. A message from Ella.

***Ella**: How did it go?*

I stared at the screen. What was I supposed to say? *He thinks I'm depressed and stoned. He thinks if I just wait long enough, I'll be fine. He doesn't hear me when I say something else is wrong.*

***Lynn**: same as before. more waiting.*
***Ella**: I'm sorry 🫤*
***Ella**: Come over?*
***Lynn**: yeah. i just need to meet Chakra first rn.*

I put my phone away.

The *dexies* in my pocket. Four left. Chakra could get more. That was something. Chakra's number was right there. One text and I'd have *dex* within a few days. Same as before. Same as I'd been doing for months. But I'd been trying to do it right this time. Trying to get help the legal way. Trying to prove I wasn't what everyone assumed I was.

It didn't matter.

I opened Chakra's chat.

***Lynn**: hey, you around? need to talk.*

Three dots appeared almost immediately.

***Chakra**: Usual spot. 5 pm?*

He'd read my tone. He always could.

***Lynn**: yeah.*

I put my phone away and started walking toward the river. The medication the psychiatrist prescribed sat in my bag. Same prescription. Same dosage. Same nothing.

That's how I survived. Illegal sources. Rationing. Self-titration. The internet and medication brochures as my only guides. It wasn't supposed to be this way.

But it was.

I was sitting on a bench by the Maas, halfway between the hospital and the coffee shop, when I called Juliette.

I had an hour before I was supposed to meet Chakra. Two hours before I was supposed to meet Ella. We'd made plans last night—movie at her place, her idea. She'd texted: *Want to come over? Watch something stupid?* And I'd said yes before I could overthink it.

But now I was spiralling. The appointment. The word *addict* still ringing in my ears. The fact that nothing had changed—same diagnosis, same medication, same feeling of being filed away under the wrong label.

And Ella.

What were we?

Since the concert. Coffee dates. Long walks. Daily texts. We'd held hands at the open mic. But we hadn't defined it. And I didn't know how to ask without sounding desperate or needy or like I was making it more than it was.

I didn't even know if I should ask. If I deserved to ask. Not after what I did to Sofie.

Worse. It made me remember the one from Year 10. I used anxiety as an excuse. I was scared of communication. I used my shyness or whatever excuse in my head to think of. I told myself I was probably a rebound. To justify the things I did. She ended up traumatised to be in a relationship. For years.

What if Ella saw the same thing? What if I asked her to be my partner and she realised I was too much? Too broken? Too mentally ill? Mood disorder. Self-harm history. All of it documented.

I called Juliette.

She picked up on the second ring.

"Hey," she said. "What's wrong?"

"How do you know something's wrong?"

"Because you never call during the day. You text. What happened?"

I took a breath. It caught halfway.

"The psychiatrist appointment was today."

"Oh shit. How did it go?"

"Same as before. Mood disorder. Depression. He thinks the *Desvenlafaxine is working because I'm not numb anymore."*

"That's... good?"

"I still can't focus. I still can't study. I told him that and he said it's because of the weed."

"The weed?"

"He called me an addict, Juliette. Because I use cannabis. Which is legal here."

"What the fuck."

"He said it's causing my concentration problems. That I need to cut back. That the cognitive symptoms will improve once my mood stabilizes." I laughed, but it came out wrong. "He's been saying that for months. 'Wait. Adjust. See.' Nothing changes."

"Did you tell him about the—" She paused. "The study drugs?"

"No." I stared at the river. "I wanted to. I thought about it. But I already knew how it would sound. He already thinks I'm an addict because of weed. If I told him I was buying *dex* from Chakra, he'd—" I stopped. "He'd put it in my file. Drug-seeking behavior. Self-medicating. Another reason not to listen to me."

"Lynn, do you realise what you just described?"

"What?"

"They give you the wrong medication. You self-medicate because you're not okay and their thing isn't working. And then they use that to not change the diagnosis." She paused, like she was checking she'd got it right.

"That's the part that gets me. It's not incompetence. It's the loop."

I didn't say anything.

"Every time you push back, it becomes evidence." She looked at me. "You know that, right? That you're not the problem."

"I know." I lit a cigarette. My hands were shaking. "I'm meeting Chakra in an hour. To get more *dex*. Because that's the only thing that actually helps."

"I'm sorry, Lynn."

"Yeah."

Another pause. Then Juliette asked, softer: "Is that why you sound like this? Or is there something else?"

She could always tell.

"I'm meeting Ella after," I said. "We're watching a movie at her place."

"Okay..."

"And I don't know what we are and I don't know how to ask her and I just—" I stopped. Started again. "How do you ask someone to be your partner without sounding like you're too invested?"

"Lynn." Juliette's voice was gentle. "Do you like her?"

"Yeah."

"Does she like you?"

"I think so?"

"Then you're not too invested. You're just... invested. Which is normal."

"It doesn't feel normal."

"Because you're scared," she said. "But that's okay. Being scared doesn't mean you shouldn't ask."

"What if she says no?"

"Then you know. And you can move on."

"What if she says yes and then leaves anyway?"

My voice cracked. "What if I do to her what I did to Sofie?"

Juliette was quiet for a long moment.

"What do you think you did to Sofie?" she asked carefully.

"I hurt her. I made her wake up and find me in that condition. I made her feel like she wasn't enough to keep me alive. And then when she tried to reconnect, I'd already moved on. I rejected her because I was already interested in Ella."

"Lynn, that's not—"

"She was right," I interrupted. "In her email. She said I changed. That I wasn't the same person anymore. That she missed the old me. And she was right. I did change. I became this—" I gestured at

nothing, at everything. "—and now I'm about to do the same thing to Ella."

"You're not going to do that."

"How do you know?"

"Because you're aware of it. Because you care. Because you called me spiraling about whether to ask her to be your partner, which means you're actually thinking about her feelings instead of just—" She paused. "Lynn, people who don't care don't spiral like this."

I didn't say anything.

"You can't control whether people stay," Juliette continued. "You can only control whether you try. And right now, you're not even letting yourself try because you're convinced you'll fail."

"That sounds like a therapy poster."

"It is. I saw it in my dentist's office last week." She paused. "But it's still true."

I laughed despite myself. "Okay."

"You don't have to ask her today," Juliette said. "Just... be with her. See how it feels. The right moment will happen."

"How do you know?"

"Because I know you. You'll know when it's right. You're not as bad at this as you think you are."

After we hung up, I sat there for another minute, watching the river. The prescription in my bag—same medication, same dosage, same diagnosis that didn't fit.

But Juliette's voice was still there: *You're not as bad at this as you think you are.*

I checked the time. Forty-five minutes until I met Chakra.

Enough time to smoke another cigarette and pretend I was okay.

I reached the floating coffee shop and saw Chakra already sitting outside, smoking, watching the river. He looked up when I approached. Took one look at my face.

"Bad appointment?" he asked.

I sat down across from him. "Same as always. Mood disorder. Depression. Wait and see."

"They still won't look at anything else?"

"He thinks the concentration problems are because of weed." I laughed bitterly. "Called me an addict. For using something that's legal here."

Chakra snorted. "Of course he did."

"I wanted to tell him about the *dex*. How it actually helps. How I can focus when I take it." I shook my head. "But I already knew how it would sound."

"Like you're drug-seeking."

"Exactly."

He nodded slowly. Stubbed out his cigarette. "What do you need?"

"More *dex*. *Whatever you can get. Same as before. I'll pay."*

He pulled out his phone, typed something. Put it back.

"I know someone. Give me a few days. Maybe a week."

"Thank you."

"How much do you have left?"

"Five pills. Maybe six."

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a small plastic bag. Three pills inside.

"Take these. Should get you through until my guy comes through."

I stared at the bag. "Chakra—"

"Don't." He pushed it across the table. "You need them. I don't. It's fine."

I took the bag. Put it in my pocket quickly, before anyone could see.

"Thank you," I said again.

He lit another cigarette. Offered me one. I took it. We sat there smoking in silence for a minute. The river moved past us, indifferent.

"You know what's fucked?" I said. "The *dex* helps more than anything they've prescribed. But I can't tell them that. I can't say 'hey, I've been buying study drugs illegally and they work better than your antidepressants.' They'd just add it to my file. Another reason I'm difficult."

"The system isn't built to listen," Chakra said. "It's built to categorize."

"Mood disorder." I exhaled smoke. "That's my category. Even though the mood medication doesn't fix the thing that feels most broken."

"What does feel broken?"

I thought about it. "My brain. The way it won't... settle. Won't focus. Won't let me sit still or read or study without scattering into a hundred directions." I gestured vaguely. "The *dex quiets that. Makes my thoughts line up. But that's not supposed to be how it works, right? Study drugs are supposed to make you wired, not calm."*

Chakra looked at me for a long moment. Something flickered across his face—recognition, maybe. But he didn't say anything.

“Are you still seeing that girl today?" he asked instead. "The one from the concert?"

I looked up. "Ella? Yeah. In an hour."

“You’re still figuring that out?"

"Yeah."

He smiled—that rare, actual smile that meant he cared.

"Good luck."

"With the *dex* or with Ella?"

"Both."

I laughed. It felt good to laugh. Like I was still capable of it.

"Are you good?" Chakra asked, studying me.

"I will be."

"That's not what I asked."

I looked at him. At one of the only people who'd been consistent. Who didn't ask me to perform. Who just showed up.

"I'm scared," I admitted. "The psychiatrist won't help. I have to keep doing this—buying pills illegally, rationing them, pretending I'm not self-medicating just to function. And Ella—I don't know how to do this. How to date someone without fucking it up."

"You're overthinking it."

"That's what Juliette said."

"Then listen to her." He tapped ash off his cigarette. "Just be honest. If she likes you, she likes you. If she doesn't, you'll survive."

"Will I?"

"You've survived worse."

That was true.

"Thanks, Chakra."

"Anytime." He checked his watch. "Go. Don't keep her waiting."

I stood up. Hesitated.

"Hey," I said. "If I fuck this up—with Ella, I mean—"

"You won't."

"But if I do—"

"Then I'll be here," he said simply. "Same as always."

Something in my chest loosened.

"Okay."

"Now go see your movie. Text me later."

I left him there by the river, smoking, watching the water move.

Ella met me outside the cinema, already grinning. Red hair bright against the grey January afternoon. Eyeliner sharp. She looked happy to see me, and that made my chest feel tight in the stupidest way.

"Ready for the dumbest movie of the year?" she asked.

"Obviously," I said.

She didn't know about the appointment. Didn't know I'd just been called an addict. Didn't know about the pills in my pocket or the prescription in my bag that wasn't helping.

And for now, I didn't want to tell her.

I just wanted to watch a stupid movie and pretend everything was normal.

The movie was exactly as dumb as we'd hoped. Bright colors. Slapstick chaos. Jokes that worked on a frequency designed for children and stoned college students.

Halfway through, Ella leaned over and whispered, "This is the best thing I've seen all month."

"Your taste is terrible," I whispered back.

She grinned. In the dark, with the screen light flickering across her face, she looked completely happy. And I thought: *This. This is what normal people do. They go to movies and laugh at stupid jokes and don't think about psychiatrists calling them addicts.*

When the credits rolled, we were both smiling like idiots.

Outside, the afternoon had turned grey and cold, but it didn't matter.

"I actually wrote several new poems," I said as we walked. "Mostly just drafts."

"I'm really keen to hear them."

"Want to walk toward the river?"

She nodded without hesitation.

The Meuse at dusk smelled of damp earth and river grit, rain soaked into stone. Under the streetlights the cobbles looked slick from earlier rain, shallow puddles catching the light. It wasn't pretty. It was just the river at dusk—water moving, air cold, the city around it still and alive all at once, like nothing bad had happened anywhere important and nothing good ever would either.

We walked until we reached our spot. The same place we'd been after the concert. Near the bridge where the wind funneled through the stone as though it were designed for cruelty.

We sat down anyway.

"Lynn," she said, suddenly switching into that exaggerated voice she used when she wanted something. It was cute in an infuriating way. "Read it. Read it."

She was too cheerful for this weather. Too bright for my brain.

I hated it.

I read the poems anyway. Most of them were drafts. Half-formed lines. Things I'd written in a rush because it felt safer to put the mess somewhere else.

And then, for the first time, I read one I'd written for her.

It was called *Red Roses*. A metaphor for love that dies too quickly because I'm too scared to let it bloom. Which was dramatic, but so was I.

When I finished, my throat felt raw from the cold. Or maybe from saying it out loud. From admitting I was scared of ruining something before it even started.

"Ella," I said, trying to sound casual. "So... this time, tell me what you think about this one."

"I can't," she said immediately.

Of course.

She wanted me to explain it. Collecting the meaning from me piece by piece.

I took a breath.

"It's about being afraid to love something because you might destroy it. Or lose it. So you just... watch it from a distance. Safe but lonely."

Ella was quiet for a moment. Then she tilted her head, and I could see that smile forming.

"So," she said. "Is the red rose a metaphor for me?"

My heart was racing and I hated it.

It felt dumb to like someone. Everyone leaves anyway. I was scared she'd be the next one.

"You changed. I don't know who you are anymore."

Sofie's words. Still there.

What if Ella saw it too? The change. The person I'd become. The one who traumatized people and moved on too fast and got called an addict by psychiatrists.

But the way she looked at me made me forget all that, for a second.

Still, I hesitated.

"Uhhh," I said, and my voice sounded pathetic in the cold. "Yes."

She laughed—that soft, pleased sound—and I could see her blushing even in the dark.

"Good," she said quietly.

She let out a little laugh, that same annoyingly cute voice again, as though she was hiding under a joke. But she was blushing. Couldn't hide that.

It was quiet. I could hear the trees swaying, the river moving, the wind biting at the stone. The bridge, the water, the dark city behind us—they felt like witnesses. As though they'd remember this even if I tried to forget it.

We didn't say much after that. We both knew it was time to head back. My place wasn't far.

The silence between us stayed. Our teeth chattering from the cold became its own soundtrack. The wind was harsh, cutting through our jackets. This was real winter.

Still, it made me softer. Which annoyed me.

Out of nowhere, Ella turned to me.

"You know," she said, casual, as though she was commenting on the weather, "if I died tonight, it would be a happy death."

I stared at her. "What do you mean by that? Like, in a Lana Del Rey song?"

She smirked. "You know me."

Then she paused, and her voice changed. Softer. More serious.

"It's not that I want to die," she said. "It's just... if it happened, I wouldn't feel cheated. I'd be okay with it. Because I'm happy. Like I've already had enough."

I understood exactly what she meant.

That feeling of not fighting death if it came, but not seeking it either. I'd lived in that space for months. Years, maybe. The edge between wanting to live and being okay with not living.

But I'd always been alone there.

Hearing Ella say it—hearing that she felt it too, even for one perfect night—made me realise I wasn't the only one who lived on that edge.

It scared me how much that mattered.

"Yeah," I said quietly. "I know exactly what you mean."

She looked at me and smiled, and I felt something shift. As though we'd just told each other a secret without using the words.

I was scared.

I didn't belong to anyone. All the things I'd done. All the people I'd hurt. People I didn't even count properly because it made me feel worse.

I'd traumatized Sofie. Made her wake up to find me in the kitchen. Made her email me months later saying she didn't recognize me anymore.

And now I was here with Ella, pretending I wouldn't do the same thing.

We were close to my building when Ella suddenly ran ahead, turning the corner as though she were escaping something.

I blinked. "Ella, what the fuck?" I called out, half-joking.

She spun around, shivering exaggeratedly. "Brrrrrr. Cold."

"It's literally a block away," I said, annoyed. "We could've run together."

Without thinking, I grabbed her arm and pulled her along. She yelped and laughed and then we were running, both of us, shoes slipping slightly on the damp pavement, breath turning visible in front of our mouths.

We didn't care about anything in the way. Just ran.

When we finally got inside, the hallway felt warm in comparison.

My apartment was quiet. Too quiet. The kind of quiet that makes you aware of every possible awkward thing that could happen next.

I didn't know the night would get awkward.

But I finally had the courage to ask her something.

"Hey," I said, and my voice sounded too serious in the small space. "I know I'm interested in you more than just this." I swallowed. "Would you like to go on a date again next week? Like... a picnic? If it's not raining. Maybe *Stadspark*?"

Ella's whole face changed. Eyes wide. Grinning. Shivering girl mode gone. Back to her usual overly cute self.

"Yes," she said immediately. "Yes. I'd love to."

Then she added, as though she couldn't help herself, "We can read poems. I'll bring my book. And I'll bring something stupid like a Minions snack so you can hate me."

"Really?" I blinked.

She nodded, still grinning, as though this was the easiest thing in the world.

That night was one of the best I'd had in Maastricht.

The whole day—the psychiatrist, the word *addict*, Chakra's pills in my pocket—it all disappeared for a while.

I liked spending time with her.

But I hated falling in love. I hated trusting people. After everything. After everyone.

I told myself I'd die by 27 anyway. When my visa ran out. A quiet timer I set in my head so I'd stop trying to kill myself every few months. I was scared of being abandoned.

Sooner or later, I'd have to leave her.

Or she'd leave me first. Like Sofie. Like everyone.

It was a cold night. We ended up curled under the blanket because of the war, because energy prices had spiked again, because the landlord was stingy with the heating. The radiator stayed cold as though it were personally offended by us.

The room was dim, lit only by a lamp in the corner. Outside, the wind rattled the window as though it wanted in.

There was a quiet after the excitement. Ella lay close, her face barely a handspan from mine. I could feel her breathing. Warm. Steady.

I hadn't dated anyone since Sofie. Nearly a year of forgetting how to exist this close to another person.

I stared at her eyes. The silence stretched. She wasn't talking much. It was strange, as though she'd flipped into the opposite version of herself—softer, smaller, unsure.

"Hey," I said quietly.

She hummed in response.

"May I kiss you?"

"Yeah," she said. "Sure."

As I leaned closer, my brain betrayed me in the stupidest way. I genuinely forgot how to kiss. As though it had been wiped from muscle memory.

"I... uh," I muttered, half-embarrassed, half-panicking. "I actually forgot how to do it. I might need a YouTube tutorial."

She didn't laugh as she usually did. The joke landed weird. The air shifted, awkward and fragile.

Then we kissed anyway.

It was gentle. Uncertain. Like we were both testing whether this was real or if we'd imagined it.

When we pulled apart, we just looked at each other.

"Okay," she said softly.

"Okay," I agreed.

And for a moment, everything felt simple.

I didn't belong to anyone. All the people I'd hurt. The pattern I couldn't seem to break. And now I was here with Ella, promising myself to break the cycle.

It didn't happen the night of the first kiss. It happened a few weeks later. After everything had softened into something real.

We were on my bed. The lights were off. It felt safe. That's what I remember most. That it felt safe. And then her hand moved somewhere it hadn't moved before.

I froze.

Not the metaphorical freeze. The actual one. The one where your body stops being yours.

Stop.

The word existed only in my head. It didn't come out. Nothing came out. I was there in the technical sense — I could feel the duvet under my hands, I could hear her breathing — but something had already separated. Gone somewhere else very quickly, without telling me first.

There was a different room in it. A different person. That particular quality of paralysis I'd spent years making sure I never had to revisit. I don't know how much time passed.

At some point I was back. And the first thing I said was: "I'm sorry."

Ella went still. Her face did something I couldn't read — not anger, not quite sadness, something that had closed over itself. She didn't say anything.

I tried again. Reached toward her somehow. She didn't respond. Not pulling away.

Just — not there. Present in the room and absent from it at the same time.

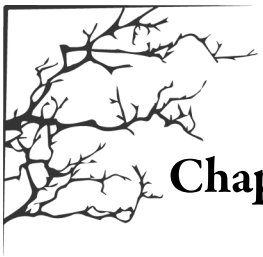
I didn't know what I'd done. I turned it over and over trying to find the thing I'd broken and I couldn't locate it and that was its own kind of suffocation. I tried to say something.

She didn't answer.

We lay there like that. Maybe fifteen minutes. The city outside kept going, indifferent.

Then quietly she said: "I don't want you to be sad."

And something in me collapsed with relief. I felt chosen. The fifteen minutes of not knowing dissolved into something warm.



Chapter 3: Spring 2023

I

Spring in the Netherlands arrived like it always did, not with certainty, but with contradiction. It didn't come warm and steady. It came fragmented. Early buds pushed through cold soil. Cherry blossoms leaned into sunny mornings. Tulips waited behind their green sheaths, promising fields of color, and soon a tide of tourists with cameras and curiosity. Rain and wind could arrive the same hour as sunshine.

Three months on *Desvenlafaxine*. The psychiatrist called it progress. I called it surviving.

The rawness from the first weeks had faded into something duller, not numb like Sertraline, but not right either. Just existing. The *dexies* were the only thing that made me feel like myself. Whatever "myself" meant anymore.

Three days after the appointment, Ella texted me:

***Ella**: The weather's getting nicer*
***Ella**: Want to do that picnic thing?*
***Ella**: Stadspark this weekend?*

I stared at my phone.

After everything, the appointments, the medication changes, the scars she'd now seen, I'd been sure she'd pull away. That the way I'd been quiet and distant for a few days would make her realise I was too much work.

But here she was. Still texting. Still wanting to spend time with me.

***Lynn**: it might still rain*
***Ella**: Then we'll read poetry in the drizzle*
***Ella**: Very dramatic*
***Ella**: Very sylvia plath*

I smiled at my phone despite myself.

***Lynn**: fine*
***Lynn**: but im bringing an umbrella*
***Lynn**: and complaining the entire time*
***Ella**: Wouldn't expect anything less*

The thing about Ella was that she made my stupid ideas sound romantic. A spring picnic. Reading poetry outside. Day drinking in the park, even if it rained. Normal people would think it was pretentious or impractical.

But with her, it felt natural, the way where you could do something ridiculous without flinching. We planned it for Sunday. *Stadspark*. Afternoon light. Her copy of Ariel, my notebook of drafts I was too scared to show anyone. Wine in thermoses because we were classy like that.

And then Sunday morning arrived.

So did the rain.

woke up to my phone buzzing.

***Ella**: Look outside*

I rolled over and looked at the window.

Rain. Heavy, relentless rain drumming against the glass.

The park would be a mud pit. Sitting on grass with poetry books would mean soggy pages and cold, wet denim.

***Lynn**: fuck*
***Ella**: My thoughts exactly*
***Ella**: Still want to do something?*
***Lynn**: come over*
***Lynn**: we can do it here*
***Ella**: Indoor spring picnic*
***Lynn**: very stupid*
***Ella**: Perfect*
***Ella**: Be there in 20*

I had twenty minutes.

I got out of bed and looked around my apartment. It was a mess. Clothes on the floor. Empty mugs on every surface. The blankets from last week still tangled on the couch.

When Ella arrived, she was soaked. Red hair dark with water, jacket dripping. She grinned like this was the best day of her life.

"It's raining," she announced, as though I couldn't see.

"Really? I hadn't noticed."

She kicked off her boots, shrugged out of her coat. Underneath, she wore a light sweater, too light for the weather, but spring made everyone optimistic. She looked soft. Comfortable. Slightly damp.

"So," she said, looking around. "Indoor picnic. How does this work?"

"I have no idea," I admitted. "I've never done this before."

"Neither have I." She grinned. "That's what makes it fun."

We spread blankets on the floor in front of the heater, the one the landlord grudgingly let us use for a few hours a day because energy prices had spiked since the war.

The apartment stayed cold enough to see our breath, but under the blankets, curled up close, it felt warmer.

Ella had her books. I had mine. The wine we'd planned to bring to the park sat between us, already half-empty.

We read for maybe twenty minutes. Ella rested her head on my shoulder, Ariel open on her lap.

I tried to focus on my notebook. Kept getting distracted by the fact that she was here, breathing against me, like this was normal.

Then she sneezed.

"Bless you."

"Thanks." She sniffled, shifted slightly.

A minute later, another sneeze.

I looked down. Her nose had turned red. Her eyes looked glassy in that pre-sick way that meant tomorrow would be worse.

"Ella."

"Mm?"

"Are you getting sick?"

"No," she said immediately, defensive, like admitting illness was the same as admitting weakness. "I'm fine. Just... spring allergies. Or the rain. Or something."

"You don't have spring allergies."

"How do you know?"

"Because you've never mentioned them before and you're trying to convince me right now."

I reached over and pressed my hand to her forehead. Warm. Not fever-warm yet, but warmer than it should be.

"You're warm."

"The blankets—"

"Not blanket warm. Sick warm."

She made a face, the kind that said she knew I was right but didn't want to admit it. "Maybe I walked through the rain too fast."

"Maybe you're getting sick and you should let me take care of you."

"Bossy."

"Yeah, well." I stood up and grabbed my hoodie off the floor. "Someone has to make sure you don't die in my apartment."

"So romantic."

"I know. I'm basically Ryan Gosling in The Notebook."

She laughed, which turned into a cough, which made me move faster.

n the kitchen, I put the kettle on and opened the medicine cabinet.

Paracetamol. Check.

Tolak Angin, the Indonesian herbal medicine Bunga had given me months ago when I'd been sick. It tastes like shit, she'd warned, but it works. Check.

I found a clean mug, dropped a tea bag in it, waited for the water to boil. Through the window, the rain kept coming down, persistent spring rain that meant winter wasn't quite done with us yet.

The trees outside were budding, tiny green promises that warmer days were coming. Eventually.

It should've felt hopeful.

Instead, I felt anxious.

Not about the rain. About Ella.

About the fact that she was sick in my apartment, trusting me to take care of her. About the fact that I wanted to. That I wasn't annoyed or inconvenienced or already planning my exit. I was just here. Present. Wanting her to feel better.

When did that happen?

The kettle clicked off. I poured the water, watched the tea steep, added honey the way she liked it.

Three weeks.

Three weeks since the concert. Since the first time we'd sat by the river and I'd wondered what we were.

Three weeks of coffee dates that turned into dinner dates that turned into sleepovers that turned into this, me making tea on a Sunday afternoon, listening to rain, feeling something that looked a lot like happiness if I didn't stare at it too hard.

I picked up the mug and the medicine and walked back to the living room.

Ella lay exactly where I'd left her, wrapped in blankets, Ariel still open on her lap even though her eyes were closed.

"Hey," I said softly.

She opened her eyes and smiled, small and sleepy.

"Tea," I said, handing her the mug. "And Indonesian magic medicine. Drink both."

"What's in the Indonesian one?"

"Honestly? No idea. Ginger, maybe? Bunga said it works, so I trust her."

Ella took the packet, examined it skeptically, then tore it open and dumped it into her tea. She made a face at the smell.

"Told you it was shit," I said.

"You did not."

"I implied it heavily."

She drank anyway, making exaggerated faces that made me laugh.

"That's... actually nice," she said, surprised.

"You're weird."

I sat next to her, close enough that our shoulders touched. She leaned into me automatically, like it didn't require negotiation anymore.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

"For poisoning you with mysterious Indonesian herbs?"

"For taking care of me."

Something tightened in my throat. I didn't know what to do with that sentence. Taking care of her didn't feel like a duty. It felt like a choice I'd already made before my brain could argue.

Later, after the tea, after the paracetamol, after her breathing evened out, I felt it.

That question I'd been carrying around like a stone in my pocket, taking it out to examine when I was alone, putting it back before anyone could see.

Juliette had said: The right moment will happen. You'll know when it's right.

And looking at Ella now, wrapped in blankets, sick but comfortable, trusting me with her vulnerability, I knew.

My heart was racing before I opened my mouth.

"Would you be my partner?"

The words hung between us, visible as our breath.

Ella blinked. Then her whole face softened, like I'd said something that made sense of everything.

"Yes," she said. "I would like to."

My chest did something stupid, racing and stumbling at the same time.

"Yeah?" I asked, needing to hear it again.

"Yeah."

Silence settled between us. Not awkward. Just there. Real.

My hands were sweaty. I was scared.

I wanted to say the right things, the mature things, the healed things, the words you say when you're trying to convince someone you're safe to love.

Instead, what came out was smaller.

"Okay," I said, like it was a question. Like it could still be taken back.

Ella's face softened.

"You're shaking," she said.

"I'm not—" I was. I stopped pretending. "I just... I don't want to fuck this up."

"Then don't," she said, simple as turning a page.

I swallowed. The next part sat behind my teeth like a pill I didn't want to take.

"I'm scared you'll leave," I said. "Like everyone."

She looked at me for a long moment.

"No," she said. Firm. Clear.

Then, softer: "Unless you hurt me."

The condition hung there. Fair. Terrifying. Real.

It sounded normal.

The kind of sentence adults said when they meant it.

Not a threat. Not a trap.

Just honesty, clean and human, the way love was supposed to be when you stopped pretending it didn't have consequences.

I nodded like it was comfort.

Ella put her book down and shifted so she faced me fully.

"Lynn," she said, and her voice was so gentle it hurt. "I'm not going anywhere."

"You say that now."

"I say that now, and I'll say it tomorrow, and I'll say it next month." She reached for my hand. "You're scared because everyone's left before. But I'm here telling you I'm different, and at some point you're going to have to decide whether to believe me."

"How?" I asked, and hated how small my voice sounded.

"You don't. Not yet." She squeezed my hand. "That's the scary part. You just have to try."

We'll try together, she meant.

My part. Your part. Both of us.

I didn't say any of that out loud.

I just nodded like I understood.

Something in my chest cracked open.

For the first time in my life, being with someone felt less like a cage and more like an anchor. Something to keep me from drifting away when the current got strong.

The rain kept falling.

We stayed under the blankets, reading and not reading, talking and not talking, until her breathing evened out and the room started to feel like it belonged to both of us.

That night, she fell asleep on my chest like it was normal.

And in the dark, I made promises silently, the way I always did.

I'll tell you when it gets bad.

I'll try not to disappear.

The next day I opened my eyes slowly.

Ella was still pressed against my chest. Her hair lay across my skin, light as a thread. Somewhere outside, birds kept talking, like they'd been awake for hours and couldn't believe I wasn't. I didn't move.

I stayed glued to the bed, like if I shifted even an inch the spell would break and she'd remember she had somewhere else to be.

Ella lay half on top of me, scrolling on her phone with one hand. I couldn't see the screen, but the sound was familiar. Bright. Stupid. Addictive.

"Is that Candy Crush?" I asked.

She didn't look up.

"Ella," I said, "are you my mom?" I made my voice mock-serious, like I was brave enough to joke.

"Shush," she said. "I'm concentrating."

I laughed into her hair.

"Do you want tea?" I asked.

"Sure."

She turned her phone slightly, not showing me anything, just shifting the weight of it in her palm.

"You know my lease is up at the end of next month," she said, like she was mentioning weather.

My chest tightened. Even in the softness, my brain started counting.

"Yeah?" I said, trying to sound normal.

"I haven't really been going back there," she said. "So. I was thinking... maybe we just make it official."

Official. Like a stamp. Like paperwork. Like naming the thing that had already happened.

I looked at her hair on my skin, the phone in her hand, the casual way she said it. Like it didn't cost anything to join lives. Like it didn't scare her.

"Do you want that?" she asked, and for the first time that morning she looked up.

A future with her in it didn't feel like a concept. It felt like a room with light on.

"Yes," I said. "I want you here."

Her smile came slow, careful, like she was letting herself believe me.

"Okay," she said. "Then I'll start packing properly this weekend."

I slid out from under her carefully, like I was removing myself from a fragile thing. In the kitchen I filled the kettle, watched the water tremble as it heated. I didn't have to think. My body already knew what to do.

Chai. One spoon of honey.

I didn't ask. It had become a routine. A habit. The kind of care you do before anyone can request it, so you never have to face the possibility of them saying no.

The morning drifted in soft. And my thoughts—my thoughts were quiet.

It startled me more than any panic ever had. Is this what they meant when they said antidepressants would work? Not fireworks. Not sudden happiness. Just one random day where you wake up and something has shifted, so slightly you almost miss it.

Like a radio finally finding the right station. I could hear actual sound. Birds outside. The annoying Candy Crush chime, little rewards for nothing. Her voice, low and warm, as if it belonged here.

I tried to hold the quiet without grabbing at it. I tried not to test it, like you test a sore tooth with your tongue.

Reddit always said the same thing, strangers telling strangers, just keep going, just survive the first weeks, it will be worth it.

Maybe this was what "worth it" looked like. A morning where the room didn't feel hostile. A morning where love didn't come with noise. For a second I thought—maybe I can finally be grateful.

For this life.

For the failed attempt my younger self made, the one that almost erased everything before it even started. I still couldn't believe I was here to experience it.

Then the thought arrived, sharp enough to cut through the softness.

I hope this isn't the dream before death.

I hope this isn't the calm that visits just to make you lower your guard.

Because I wanted my hand in hers for a long time. Not as a . Not as a brief miracle. I wanted it as a life. Every soft morning.

The bed still warms even after you leave it. The quiet staying, not because I earned it, not because I behaved well enough, but because it finally decided to stay.

II

Follow-up appointment. Three months since he'd put me on *Desvenlafaxine*.

The waiting room smelled the same. Institutional cleaning products and stale coffee from a machine no one used. The receptionist didn't look up when I signed in. I sat in the same plastic chair I always sat in, underneath the same poster about depression featuring people smiling in a park.

Three months of swallowing pills that were supposed to help. Three months of waiting to feel like myself again. The receptionist called my name. I followed her down the beige hallway, past the

diplomas, past the motivational quotes framed like they meant something.

The psychiatrist was already typing when I walked in. He gestured to the chair without looking up.

"So. How are we doing?"

I sat down. Took a breath.

"Not great," I said. "I still can't focus. I'm still—" I searched for words that would make sense to him. "Scattered. All the time. Like my brain has twenty tabs open and I can't close any of them. And my mood is still up and down. I thought the *Desvenlafaxine* was supposed to stabilize things by now."

He nodded, typing. Not looking at me.

"The *Desvenlafaxine* takes time. Some patients need a higher dose to see full therapeutic effect."

"It's been three months."

"Everyone responds differently." He scrolled through something on his screen. "I see you came in with mood instability, depressive episodes, some anxiety. The Sertraline wasn't working. We switched you to *Desvenlafaxine* at 50 mg." He looked up briefly. "You're still experiencing mood fluctuations?"

"Yes. And the focus thing—"

"Executive function difficulties can be a symptom of depression," he said, like he was reading from a textbook. "Once we get the mood stabilized, the cognitive symptoms often improve on their own."

I wanted to scream. I'd heard this before. *Wait. Adjust. See.* The medical system's favourite mantra.

"The Sertraline made me numb," I said, trying again. "Like I couldn't feel anything. I had to—" I stopped. Couldn't tell him about the self-harm. He'd write it in my file. Flag me as something. "I just couldn't feel anything. And now the *Desvenlafaxine* is different, but it's not... right. I still can't think clearly. I still can't focus on anything for more than a few minutes."

He typed something.

"I'm going to increase your dosage," he said. "100mg instead of 50. That should help with the mood regulation, and as I said, the cognitive symptoms often follow."

My stomach dropped.

"The adjustment period," I started. "Last time, the first few weeks—"

"Yes, the side effects may return temporarily during the adjustment. Some patients experience increased mood swings, anxiety, sleep disturbances. That should settle within two to three weeks." He looked at me then. Clinical. Assessing.

"Do you have support at home? Someone who can check on you during the transition?"

Ella. I thought about Ella, who I'd just promised to communicate with. Who I'd asked to be patient with me. Who I'd sworn I'd tell when things were hard instead of shutting down like I did with Sofie.

"Yes," I said.

"Good. That's important during adjustment periods." He printed something. The printer whirred. "If you experience any thoughts of self-harm, contact the crisis line immediately. Or go to the ER."

The same disclaimer they always gave. Like a legal form. Like checking a box.

May increase suicidal thoughts in the first few weeks.

I'd read it on every leaflet. Every time.

"What about the concentration problems?" I tried one more time. "The way I can't focus, can't finish tasks, can't—"

"Let's see how you respond to the higher dose first." He handed me the prescription.

"Cognitive symptoms are often secondary to mood disorders. Treat the core mood disorder, and the cognitive issues usually improve."

I stared at the paper in my hand. *Desvenlafaxine* 100mg. Double what I'd been taking.

He didn't ask about the study drugs. Didn't know they existed. Didn't know that the only time I felt like my brain worked properly was when I took something no doctor had prescribed.

"Is there anything else?"

I thought about telling him. About the *dexies*. About how they actually helped. About how maybe, possibly, the problem wasn't depression at all but something else—something the stimulants fixed that the antidepressants kept missing.

But I knew how it would sound.

Drug-seeking. Addict. Non-compliant patient.

Chakra had called me that once, as a joke. It wasn't funny.

"No," I said. "That's everything."

"Good. Next appointment in six weeks. We'll assess how you're responding to the increased dosage then."

Six weeks. Forty-two days of adjustment. Of side effects returning. Of mood swings and sleep disturbances and whatever else the leaflet warned about.

Forty-two days of hoping this time would be different.

"Thank you," I said, because that's what you say, even when someone has just handed you a prescription for the same approach that hasn't worked for months.

Outside, April had finally committed to something.

Not warmth exactly—the wind still bit when it wanted to—but the light had changed. Longer days. Buds on trees that hadn't been there last week. The city pretending it knew what season it was.

I walked to the pharmacy on autopilot. Handed over the prescription. Waited while the pharmacist counted pills into an orange bottle. Paid. Took the paper bag.

On the sidewalk, I looked at the label.

Desvenlafaxine 100mg. Take one tablet daily with food.

Inside the bag, the patient information leaflet. I didn't need to read it. I'd memorized it months ago. But, I still do it anyway.

> *Serious side effects: unusual changes in mood or behavior, anxiety, panic attacks, trouble sleeping, irritability, hostility, aggressiveness, restlessness, hyperactivity, suicidal thoughts or actions.*

I didn't think I remembered this one. I did remembered increased sweating — and headache where I forgot to take the dosage for several hours late.

> *The risk of suicidal thoughts or actions may be higher in the first few months of treatment or when the dose is changed especially in children, teenagers and young adult.*

First few months. When the dose is changed. The dose had just changed. Another risk that I need to take. Again.

I started walking home. The pharmacy was ten minutes from the apartment, down streets I'd walked hundreds of times. Past the café where Ella and I had our second coffee date. Past the corner where we'd first held hands.

Everything looked the same. The buildings. The bicycles. The tourists with their maps and their certainty about where they were going.

I didn't feel the same.

I felt like I was watching myself from slightly outside my body. Like there was a delay between thinking and feeling, between seeing and understanding, between emotions and expressing.

Maybe that was the *Desvenlafaxine*. Maybe that was just me.

When I got home, Ella was on the couch crocheting. Her AirPods on the ears. Maybe. Another podcast— something she

usually does either an alien conspiracy theories, a real life murder mystery or some fucked up conspiracy around celebrities.

She looked up when I came in. Smiled.

"Hey."

I put my bag down. Sat next to her. Took a breath.

"He increased my dosage," I said. "100mg instead of 50."

"What's taking so long. I thought you told me you'll get back by half an hour ago. I already too hungry"

I'd promised to communicate. To tell her when things were hard. To not shut down like I did with Sofie.

She closed put her left AirPods back to the case, giving me her full attention. "That sounds promising."

"Maybe." I picked at a thread on the couch cushion.

Ella's eyes drifted past me, toward my bag. Not my face, not my mouth, the bag.

"What's that?" she asked.

I followed her gaze. The small zipper pouch sat half-open, black fabric, the kind Chakra used for everything. Lighters, gum, pills.

"From Chakra," I said.

"From Chakra," she repeated, like she was tasting the name for toxins. "What's in it?"

I hesitated, and that hesitation did the confessing for me.

"Drugs?" she asked.

The way she said it made it small. A stupid little vice. A uni-boy cliché.

"Dexies," I said. "I'm not supposed to have them."

Ella's mouth tightened, not fear, not concern, more like disappointment that she had to deal with a new category of problem.

"So you're self-medicating," she said.

"Sometimes," I said, and hated how thin it sounded. Like I'd planned it. Like I'd chosen it for fun.

“Do you hear yourself?” she said, and she still held her book like a shield, her finger marking the page she wanted to return to. “You go to a doctor and then you decide you know better— Just let the professionals do”

She wouldn’t know the bureaucracy. Just to get into the front door. I opened my mouth, then closed it. Rethink about what I’d say.

“I just hated. The way of my mind works. It was the only things that fixed it at the moment. I just scared”

On the coffee table, her grinder sat where it always sat. The little jar. The routine. The normal version of needing something.

Ella didn’t look at that. She looked at my bag.

"I'm telling you because I promised I would. Because I said I wouldn't just disappear into my head and expect you to figure out what's wrong."

I made myself look at her.

“I might be more volatile for a while. More up and down. I might have bad days where I can’t explain what’s wrong because I don’t know myself. And I wanted you to know that if that happens, it’s not you. It’s the medication adjusting.”

She was quiet for a moment.

Then she reached over and took my hand.

“I’m not your therapist,” she said. “Just follow what they say. You’re not medical professionals.”

I don’t want her to think I’m being difficult on purpose. Or that I’m not trying. Because I am trying. I’m doing everything the doctors tell me to do. I’m taking the pills and going to the appointments and hoping that eventually something works. I'm telling her because I promised I would. Because I said I wouldn't expect — no. I wouldn’t allow letting her figure out what’s wrong while I disappeared into my head. Communications. I remind myself clear. I will take the risk to get better. For me. To not allow someone loving a broken person.

“I know you’re trying.”

"It just hasn't worked yet. And I'm scared that—" My voice caught. I swallowed. "I'm scared that it won't. That I'll keep trying and nothing will change and you'll get tired of waiting for me to be okay."

Ella squeezed my hand, once, like she was confirming a choice.

"Hey," she said softly. "I'm not going anywhere."

The same words from that night. The night I'd asked her to be my partner. The night she'd said yes.

"You say that now."

"I say that now, and I'll say it next month, and I'll say it during your adjustment period." She leaned in, kissed my forehead. Warm. Quick. "We'll get through it. Together."

I wanted to believe her.

I wanted to believe that telling her—communicating, being vulnerable, doing everything I never did with Sofie—would be enough. That this time would be different.

That trying would actually matter.

"Okay," I said. "Together."

She went back to her book.

Not immediately. She held my hand a second longer, her eyes still on me, then her finger found her place again and the page reclaimed her.

I stayed next to her, close enough that our shoulders touched. The apartment was quiet except for the sound of pages turning and the rain that had started again outside.

In my bag, the orange bottle of pills.

In my pocket, the *dexies* I'd gotten from Chakra.

One legal. One not. One prescribed by a doctor who thought I had depression. One that actually made my brain work.

I'd take the *Desvenlafaxine* because I was supposed to. Because the system said this was how you got better. Because compliance was the price of being taken seriously.

And I'd keep the *dexies* for the days when compliance wasn't enough.

That night, after Ella fell asleep, I lay in the dark and thought about the appointment.

He hadn't asked what I thought was wrong.

He hadn't asked what helped, what didn't, what I'd noticed about my own brain.

He'd looked at my file and typed while I talked. The screen glow on his glasses. The quiet little clicks of the keyboard like a verdict being written in real time.

Mood disorder. Depression. Anxiety.

Those were the words in my file. Those were the boxes I fit into.

But what if the boxes were wrong?

The *dexies* helped. Not just a little—they helped in a way nothing else had.

When I took them, my brain got quiet. Not numb like Sertraline. Not raw like the first weeks of *Desvenlafaxine*. Just... quiet. Focused. Like someone had finally tuned the radio to the right station instead of leaving it on static.

That meant something. Didn't it?

Stimulants helped people with ADHD. I knew that from Google, from Reddit threads I'd fallen down at 3 AM, from the whispered conversations I'd had with Chakra when he handed me the pills like it was nothing.

"These are for studying," he'd said. "Focus drugs. Work great. One of my favourites. To cram an all nighter"

He'd never said the word.

Neither had I.

Because saying it felt like asking for something. Like claiming a label I hadn't earned. Like the doctors would look at me and decide—drug-seeking, excuse-making, wants stimulants to get high.

So I kept quiet. Took the antidepressants they gave me. Waited for them to work. And when they didn't, I took the study drugs that actually helped and told no one.

Next to me, Ella shifted in her sleep. Her hand found mine even unconscious, fingers curling around my palm.

I held on.

Tomorrow I'd start the new dosage. 100mg. Adjustment period. Side effects. Six weeks until the next appointment.

And I'd keep trying. Keep communicating. Keep doing everything differently than I had before.

Maybe this time it would count.

Outside, the rain kept falling. Spring rain that couldn't decide if it wanted to be gentle or harsh. The trees were budding. The days were getting longer. The season of renewal, everyone called it.

I closed my eyes and waited for it to feel like that.

I opened my eyes.

For a second I couldn't place the room. Grey light, curtains breathing. The bed still warmed around me like the night hadn't finished.

I reached over. Empty.

"Ella?" My voice came out rough, like I'd swallowed sand.

No answer. My body was already tensing. Scanning before I was fully awake.

Then I heard it—the soft click of a lighter, the little inhale that always sounded like someone stealing air. The bathroom fan hummed. A smell slipped under the door, sweet and burnt. I pushed myself up. My phone was on the pillow beside hers, face-down, like it had been punished.

The bathroom door was half-closed.

Ella sat on the closed toilet lid, knees apart, hoodie sleeves pushed up. Smoke curled toward the ceiling like it knew the way.

"Morning," I said.

She looked over, eyes half-lidded, jaw unclenched, calm.

"Morning," I said. Probably safe. Probably.

"Morning," she said back, flat expression.

We were supposed to go out today. At least—I thought we were. The thought arrived with its own doubt attached, like even my memory needed permission.

My chest started counting time anyway. The distance between "we planned" and "I misunderstood."

Last time I woke up and she'd already gone to the Markt. No text. No knock. Just absence where a person should've been. Later she'd said, I'm doing it for us. I can't bother to wait. I can't bother to wake you up.

As if waiting for me was a favor. As if waking me was charity. As if my time blindness were proof that I didn't get to have needs. That I didn't get to set the pace. That if I couldn't keep up, I didn't get included. I stood in the doorway and tried to pick the right version of myself.

Not defensive. Not needy. Not "too much."

The easy one. The low-maintenance one. The one who didn't make mornings heavy.

"So... what time are we leaving?" I asked.

Even the question sounded like a negotiation.

She exhaled smoke and shrugged.

"We'll see."

"We'll see" always meant, I'll see. I'll decide. And you'll adjust.

I stared at the weed between her fingers. Her routine sat in the open, like it belonged. My coping had to stay zipped in a pouch in my bag like contraband.

I swallowed and nodded, practicing the shape of being easy.

This was the bargain, wasn't it. Not rebellion or escape, just the daily choice between being real and being bearable—and each time I chose bearable, some part of me went missing.

III

Two weeks on the higher dose and everything felt wrong.

The psychiatrist said adjustment. The leaflet said temporary. My body said chaos.

The first week, I couldn't sleep. Lay awake until 3 AM, thoughts racing, skin crawling. The second week, I couldn't stay awake. Crashed at 7 PM, slept through alarms, dragged myself to class like I was moving through water.

The mood swings were worse this time. Not the Sertraline numbness—this was the opposite. Everything too loud, too sharp. I cried in the bathroom between tutorials. Snapped at Ella over nothing. Apologized. Did it again.

The only thing that steadied me was the *dexies*. I rationed them carefully now. Chakra's supply wasn't infinite. I saved them for when I absolutely needed to function—exams, group work, the days when Ella needed me to be okay.

I checked the time before taking one. 9:15 AM. Should kick in by 9:45. Should last until afternoon. Should be enough to get through this tutorial without falling apart.

I hated that I knew the timing so precisely. Hated that these pills—the ones I bought illegally, the ones no doctor had prescribed—were the only thing keeping me functional.

Ella came out of the bathroom, hair wet, towel around her shoulders. She smiled when she saw the coffee I'd made. Smile—but which kind? I checked the eyes. Crinkled slightly at corners. Reached. Real.

"You're up early," she said.

"Couldn't sleep."

She nodded, took the cup, sat at the table. Put in her AirPods. Scrolled through her phone while she drank.

I sat across from her. She got up and moved to the living room.

Russian roulette. That's what mornings were now.

Spin the chamber. Will Ella be warm today or cold?

Pull the trigger. Hope for a blank.

Love as reward. Warmth as currency. I learned to check my balance before speaking. I sipped my coffee and watched her from across the room, trying to decode whether I was safe today.

Then we got ready. We both had classes in an hour. Usual things, not talking, just getting ourselves ready. I put on my headphones as we walked out.

"I don't like it when you do that," she said.

"I thought it was okay. You always have your AirPods in, even when I'm talking to you or when we're outside."

"It's different. I can still hear you."

"It has the same transparency mode."

"Still, it looks like you're ignoring me from the outside."

"Oh, okay then."

I pulled them back.

She explained something about work, about how it looked to other people. I told her I felt like she ignored me too when she wore her AirPods. She brushed it off.

Before, I wouldn't have noticed the contradiction. Wouldn't have registered the asymmetry. The doubled standard.

Now I saw everything. Every reversal. Every moved goalpost.

Was this clarity? Or was this the paranoia everyone warned about?

The *Desvenlafaxine* made me see the slights in 4K. Or maybe it was making me paranoid. I couldn't tell anymore.

I tried to tell Ella what was happening.

"The medication is making everything harder," I said one night. We were on the couch, her scrolling her phone, me pretending to read. "I know I've been difficult. I'm sorry."

"You have been difficult," she said. Not mean. Just factual.

"I'm trying. I really am."

"I know."

But there was something in her voice. A distance. The first time I'd heard it.

"Hey," I said. "Talk to me. What are you feeling?"

I was communicating. Asking her directly. Doing the thing I never did with Sofie.

"I'm tired," she said. "That's all."

"Tired of me?"

"Tired of—" She stopped. Shook her head. "Just tired. It's fine."

It wasn't fine. I could see it. But she wouldn't say it, and I didn't know how to make her.

The next afternoon, I ran into Giovanni at the library.

"How's living with Ella?" he asked, still staring at his laptop.

"Good."

He kept typing. Keys clicking like he was taking notes on my life.

Then he said, "She seems happy."

The way he said it—flat, observational—like he was commenting on the weather. Like it was something I should've been able to confirm without hesitation.

"Yeah," I said.

"You seem less happy."

I stared at him. "I'm fine. The medication's—" I stopped, tried again. "It's an adjustment period."

He looked up then. Flat. Assessing. Like he wasn't interested in my explanation, only in whether it worked.

"As long as you're happy," he said.

He said it like a conclusion.

I wanted to ask what he meant. Why he said it like that. But Giovanni never explained himself.

And I didn't want to know the answer.

His stomach growled loud enough that he glanced down at it, annoyed, like it had interrupted his point.

“Bánh mì?” he said. “My shout.”

Giovanni and I ate lunch in a place that smelled like colonisation. Fish sauce and fried oil trapped in the walls. Plastic chairs. Laminated menus with flags in the corners, like a whole history could be reduced to font choices.

I stared at him. At the book sticking out of his tote bag. P*ramoedya's Bumi Manusia*.

"What?" he said.

"You read Pramoedya."

"Yeah." Flat. Like I'd pointed out he was wearing shoes.

"It's about a Javanese guy trying to be modern inside a colonial system that won't let him. He does everything right and the system still wins." He paused.

"It's not a fun read."

"I read that in Year 12," I said.

He looked confused. "Wait, really?"

"His books were banned for decades. They only lifted the ban long after he was gone." I picked at my bánh mì.

"But we still read him. Everyone does. He wrote the whole thing from a prison island — wasn't allowed paper.”

"That's the most insane thing I've ever heard," he said.

“Told it out loud to other prisoners and they memorised it."

Giovanni stared at me. For once, his face actually moved. I didn't ask why he'd read it. I didn't need to. Giovanni had never once asked me the stupid questions, never "what's it like" or "do you miss it." He'd just shown up one day having read the book. That was how he worked. He'd never tell you he was paying attention. He'd just arrive already informed, curious.

"Did you like it?" he asked.

"Yeah, kind of." I looked at my bánh mì. "It was one of the only books I ever read in my own mother tongue."

That's what made it bearable. Giovanni could talk about dark things without making them feel dark. He delivered everything at the same temperature — lunch, books, colonial violence, your collapsing relationship — all flat, all equally weighted, like nothing deserved more panic than anything else.

Then I saw it on the menu—spring rolls. The kind Ella liked. Crispy wrapper, sweet dipping sauce, the exact thing she always stole off my plate. I ordered them without thinking.

Giovanni watched me for half a second.

"Taking it home?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, and felt my face soften without permission. "Ella loves these."

He didn't smile. He just nodded once, like he'd filed it away.

I wanted it to be sweet. I wanted to come home with something warm in a paper bag and watch Ella's face change, just for a second, into that look that made me feel like I existed.

On the walk back, I held the bag like it was fragile.

Like it could justify all the small ways I'd been trying. Like it could buy me one good evening where she didn't look at me like work.

Later that evening.

I noticed Ella's medication was nearly out because the routine finally left physical evidence.

Her birth control came as a calendar strip, a flat blister pack printed with days and arrows, the kind you could read like a timeline. Each empty bubble left a tiny dent in the week, proof she'd taken it, proof the routine had happened. I picked it up.

ma di wo do vr za zo, marching across the foil like instructions you didn't get to argue with. Only the last do vr za zo was left, three little pills holding up the week.

On the coffee table beside it sat another box from the pharmacy, small and battered at the corners, the sticker starting to lift where the

flap kept opening. Inside, silver *doordrukstrips*. The foil was creased from thumbs, from days, from being handled until it stopped looking like medicine and started looking like furniture.

"Hey," I said, holding the strip up. "This is almost finished."

Ella looked at it like it was an accusation.

"So?" she said.

"So," I repeated, keeping my voice neutral. "I'm going to the pharmacy tomorrow."

She rolled her eyes, small and automatic.

"Can you do it for me?" she asked.

I nodded.

She went back to whatever she'd been doing, scrolling, reading, nothing urgent, like time would just organise itself around her if she ignored it hard enough.

"Want to watch something?" I asked.

We were both on the couch. She was on her phone. I was on my laptop. Two screens, two separate rooms inside the same room.

"Not really," she said. "I'm kind of tired. Want to sleep."

She didn't look at me when she said it.

"I'm going to sleep now," she added, like she was announcing a decision, not inviting me into it.

Something in her face held for a second—something I couldn't read.

Or maybe I could read it and just didn't want to.

"Okay," I said. "Yeah. No problem."

My voice said no problem.

My chest said otherwise. Tight. Airless. That feeling of drowning on dry land.

The medication was supposed to help with this. The anxiety. The rejection sensitivity. Instead it made everything sharper, like it had turned the volume down on chaos but up on meaning.

She went to the bedroom. Swapped her AirPods for her headphones, the final step in her usual sleep routine. A seal. A closed door without a door.

I stayed in the living room.

It had been lonely for the past few days.

I used to talk so much—back then, with my friends, with strangers, with anyone who felt safe enough to be temporary. Now I measured my words in a few lines a day. It was weird. Not because I was alone.

Because I wasn't.

I lived with someone. I slept next to her. I had someone beside me when I did errands, when I woke up, when I made tea, when I tried to become a person worth staying with.

I was never physically alone the way I used to be. But I still felt the void.

Lonely, but not alone. I wondered which one was worse.

And I hated that my brain tried to turn it into a philosophy problem, like I could solve it if I named it correctly. Like loneliness had a definition I could memorise and then finally outgrow.

As if the choice were always the same choice. To ask, and risk becoming too much. Or to stay quiet, and watch myself disappear one small, reasonable compromise at a time.

A tear slid down my cheek before I could stop it. I wiped it with the back of my hand, fast, like it was evidence. I'm just being dramatic, I told myself.

I guess.

In the dark, I thought about the *dexies* in my drawer.

I'd been taking them more often lately. When one dose wasn't enough to quiet the thoughts. When the adjustment period made everything static. Chakra's supply wasn't infinite. The math didn't work. I'd run out early.

I'd figure it out.

I always did.

The medication was supposed to help me solve problems. It just helped me see all the ones I couldn't fix. I took one in the dark. Swallowed it dry. Tomorrow I'd ration better. Tomorrow I'd be more careful. Tomorrow the chamber might have a blank. I closed my eyes and I can finally sleep.

IV

Three weeks on 100mg. The adjustment period that was supposed to be temporary.

I woke up and couldn't remember why I should get out of bed. This was different from before. The Sertraline had made me numb. The lower dose of *Desvenlafaxine* had made me raw. This—the higher dose—made me volatile. Like my emotions were a dial someone kept spinning randomly. Grief. Anger. Nothing. Panic. Nothing again.

The leaflet said *may increase suicidal thoughts in the first few weeks*.

It had been three weeks. When did "first few weeks" end? When did side effects become just... effects?

Late April and the tulips were dying already.

Peak bloom lasted three days, then rot. Tourists still flooding the streets, photographing decay like it was beautiful. Spring in the Netherlands was always a short con.

I pulled the trigger that morning. The bullet came out.

Ella was cold.

It was after breakfast.

"Going to the market? No, I'm not feeling it. I changed my mind."

She just decided to dye her hair at the only free time I had this week, while we'd planned something else.

Did I do something? Did I just do things that upset her or—

"Oh, also."

"Can you stop using my comb? Just use your own stuff please."

"What? Why? You always used mine before until just now?"

"It's just a comb. Why are you being so dramatic about it?"

I didn't mean it that way. It just seemed weird and double standard at first when I heard it—or was it? I shouldn't even bring it up. Shouldn't ask questions.

I just—I just don't know.

Two days ago she decided what to cook and what groceries to buy without even considering me, said it wasn't a big deal, like I'm an extra chair at the table, like you can shift the plates and not notice what's missing. Before, I told her it would be good if we planned it beforehand, just a quick check-in, what we want to cook, what we want to eat, what we actually have in the fridge, what day we're going to the market, because planning is the only thing that keeps my brain from sliding, and I do that with her, not even just with her, in general, with friends too, because it's normal, isn't it, to coordinate, to treat the other person like they exist in the decision, but when I say it out loud it turns into a complaint in her ears, it turns into me being difficult, dramatic, needy, and the medication makes every word feel like a landmine, clarity or chemistry, clarity or chemistry, and I can't tell if I'm seeing the double standard or inventing it, because the dial keeps spinning, anger then grief then nothing then panic then nothing again, and her face is fl— Shut the fuck up. Shut the fuck up. Stop. Stop changing the meaning of everything the second it leaves my mouth.

I just stood there. I'd learned her triggers before I learned my own. Don't mention plans she might cancel. Don't ask what she's thinking. Don't need anything when she's tired. Don't be sad when she's already sad. Don't be too happy when she's not.

At first it didn't feel like rules, it felt like being careful, like being considerate, like trying not to add weight to a day that was already heavy. I adjusted. I timed my questions. I swallowed reactions before

they became reactions. I watched her face and corrected myself mid-sentence.

And then one day it clicked that I was carrying the whole thing like a tray, elbows locked, wrists steady, trying not to tilt even a millimetre, because if it tipped, everything broke.

The list grew every day. I kept it in my head like a survival manual.

But, would she do the same things for me?

I had tried to talk to Ella about how I was feeling. Multiple times.

"I'm having dark thoughts," I'd said the week before.

“I just feel you a bit distant”

"The medication—it's supposed to help, but I think it's making things worse. I don't feel stable. I feel like I'm falling apart."

I was being vulnerable. Honest. Communicating the hard things.

Ella looked at me. Something flickered across her face—worry? Frustration? I couldn't tell.

“I am not your therapist”

"My next appointment isn't for three more weeks."

"Can you call them? Make an emergency appointment?"

"They don't do emergency appointments. I'd have to go to the ER, and they'd just—" I stopped.

"Okay," she said. "I'm aware. Just go to the ER”

“My insurance didn’t cover it”

“Oh. I see”

That was it. I told myself she was tired. That she was doing her best. That I couldn't expect her to be my therapist.

But something cold settled in my chest anyway.

The next time I tried, she said: "Maybe you should try to be more positive."

I was communicating. She wasn't listening.

Or maybe I was communicating wrong. Maybe I was too much, too intense, too broken even when I was trying to be honest about the breaking.

"Hey. I think I just need to go somewhere to be safe."

I knew this feeling. I needed to go to the mental preventive care. I grabbed my jacket, opened the door.

Three months ago I would've apologised. Wouldn't have remembered that she'd used mine first, that this was a reversal, that the rules kept changing and I was always the one breaking them.

Now I remembered everything. Every reversal. Every moved goalpost.

The medication made me a very good record-keeper. It did not make me better at relationships. Did not calm me.

I just walked. It was a light drizzle rain. I just walked straight toward the bridge. I couldn't think. I just went blank.

The next thing I remember, my eyes felt dead. I was just standing at the edge of the bridge.

I didn't even remember deciding to walk there. My body just moved.

Someone tapped my shoulder. It was Krzysztof, holding an umbrella.

"What happened?"

"It's just the usual crashing out."

"Come on. McDonald's."

He didn't make me explain the story, the fight, the reasons, the disgusting details people always want so they can decide whether you deserve sympathy.

We used to get McNuggets for munchies, back when getting stoned together was still a routine instead of a symptom.

That night he didn't look at me like I was fragile. He didn't treat me like a crisis. He just walked next to me, umbrella tilted toward me more than him.

"It's on me today," he said.

That was the only thing he said about it.

Inside, the place smelled like wet jackets. The lights were too bright. My hands shook when I peeled open the sauce, and it made me angry because I hated being seen as someone who shook.

Krzysztof talked about something else, something pointless. A tutorial. A lecturer. Some Dutch bureaucracy bullshit. He told me he got fined for speeding on the drive down from Germany, like he'd forgotten the Netherlands wasn't the Autobahn, like speed limits were a suggestion until they weren't.

I nodded at the right times and let his voice rinse my head clean.

I kept thinking: I try so hard not to relapse and it still happens. Like my brain doesn't care what I want. Like it waits for the smallest crack, then jumps.

What's the point of walking through it if I always end up back at the same edge?

But that night felt smaller than the others. Less dramatic. Less inevitable.

Maybe because I wasn't alone at the stop. Maybe because someone bought me nuggets and didn't ask for a confession in return. Maybe because when I finally came back into my body properly, I could feel everything again—the sting in my skin, the burn of cold air, the ache in my jaw from clenching.

Pain meant I was still here.

"I tried to do everything different this time," I said eventually. "With Ella. I communicated. I was honest. I told her what I needed." I laughed, but it came out wrong. "And it still fell apart."

"Maybe it's not about what you did," Krzysztof said.

"Then what is it about?"

He shrugged. "Some people can't hold someone else's pain. Doesn't mean you did something wrong."

I wanted to believe him. I wasn't sure I could.

But the nuggets were warm, and he was here, and that was something.

My phone buzzed

***Ella**: Can you come back home*
***Lynn**: i just need to be alone*
***Ella**: I want you to be here. I don't want to be alone.*

I just stared at the messages.

The morning after, it was the monthly appointment.

"So, how are you, Ashlynn?"

Friendly tone. Scripted, but not fake.

"Not great," I said. "The higher dosage—it's not helping. The mood swings are worse. I'm more volatile, not less."

He nodded, typing. Looking at his screen, not at me.

"Some patients take longer to adjust. It can be six to eight weeks before the full effect—"

"I don't have six to eight weeks." My voice cracked. "I'm falling apart now. The side effects—the leaflet says it can increase suicidal thoughts. I think that's happening."

He looked up then. Finally.

"Are you having thoughts of self-harm?"

I thought about the bridge. About Krzysztof finding me there.

"Yes."

He typed something. Then: "I can add an adjunct medication. Something to help stabilise mood while the *Desvenlafaxine* continues to build up in your system."

Another pill. Another adjustment period.

"What about the focus issues?" I asked. "The concentration problems. They're not getting better. The antidepressants aren't helping with that at all."

"Executive function often improves once mood is fully stabilised. Let's focus on that first."

Always the same answer. Wait. Adjust. See.

"Is there anything else that could be causing the focus problems?" I tried. "Something besides depression?"

He glanced at his screen. At my file. At whatever label had been attached to me.

"Your presentation is consistent with mood disorder. The concentration difficulties are a common symptom. Once we get the depression under control, you should see improvement across the board."

I wanted to argue. Wanted to tell him about the *dexies*. About how they helped in ways the *Desvenlafaxine* never had. About how maybe—maybe—the diagnosis was wrong.

But I knew how it would sound. Drug-seeking. Non-compliant. Difficult patient.

I'd been all those things before, according to my file.

"Okay," I said instead. "Let's try the adjunct."

He printed the prescription. I took it. Left.

Outside, late April light fell flat against the buildings. The tulips in the window boxes were already wilting.

I had a new prescription for a medication I didn't want, added to a medication that wasn't working, to treat a condition I wasn't sure I had.

And in my pocket, the last few *dexies* from Chakra. The ones that actually helped. The ones I couldn't tell anyone about.

I walked home slowly, feeling the distance between what the system saw and what I knew to be true.

The gap was getting wider every day.

V

Early May arrived hot and sudden. Allergies everywhere. Pollen coating cars. The beautiful spring everyone promised—gone before I'd noticed it arrive.

The medication made everything sharp. Including the realisation:

I'd missed the moment things were supposed to get better.

Four weeks on the higher dose. Plus the new adjunct medication the psychiatrist had added. Two pills now, every morning. Neither of them helping.

The anger didn't arrive like a thought. It arrived like a temperature.

My jaw had been locked for so long it felt normal until it didn't. My teeth pressed against each other. My throat stayed tight, like it didn't want to let anything soft through.

I knew why they left. I hated that the explanation existed. The way I was born followed me like a file. It followed me into rooms, into schools, into strangers' faces. It turned everything into treatment.

Therapy. Medication. Compliance.

Lately, it came up less. Not because it healed. Because I stopped doing the part that made other people comfortable. I wasn't sad. I wasn't trying. I forgot the mask until I noticed my face didn't ache.

The *Desvenlafaxine* didn't make me brave. It made me sharp. Everything sat too close to the surface. Sounds hit harder. Light hit harder. People's politeness hit like an insult.

100 milligrams.

I could feel it in the way my patience ran out before my sentences did.

The chamber wasn't random anymore.

I'd tried everything I knew how to do.

I told her when I was struggling. Said the words out loud: *I'm not okay today. The medication is making everything harder. I need you to be patient with me.*

I communicated. I was vulnerable. I did all the things I was supposed to do. All the things I didn't do with Sofie.

When I said *I'm struggling*, she heard *you're not trying hard enough*.

When I asked for patience, she gave me silence.

When I tried to explain what the medication was doing to me, she said, "Maybe you should try to be more positive."

I was doing everything differently than I had before. And it still wasn't working.

The restaurant felt too bright. Everything did lately—the overhead lights, the white plates, even the sound of other people talking.

Ella had suggested going out. "We should do something normal," she'd said, like normal was a prescription we could fill.

She went quiet halfway through her pasta. Not gradually, not tired—just quiet, like someone had turned her volume to zero. Her fork scraped the plate once, then stopped. She stared at her phone like it was giving her instructions.

"We were supposed to go to IKEA after," I said.

She changed the plan without looking up.

"Let's just go back."

Back to her car. Back to my place. No explanation, like explanations were optional if you said them calmly enough.

In my room, she sat at the end of the bed. Phone in her hand. Thumb moving. No sound.

I sat on the sofa and waited for a cue. A glance. A normal sentence. Anything that implied we were two people in the same day.

Nothing came.

I'd told her about the voices, the constant checking. How quiet felt like Russian roulette—you never knew which moment of silence meant someone had already left you in their head.

She knew this. She knew, and she went quiet anyway.

After a while I crossed the room and stood near her, close enough that she had to notice if she wanted to.

She didn't want to.

"Ella."

"I just don't know how to talk," she said finally, still looking at the phone. "My parents just don't talk to me whenever they're mad. I just can't. Probably autism or something."

Probably autism or something. I'd told her I had autism. I'd told her how silence worked for me—like a threat that never resolved.

"So you're mad at me?"

"No." Too fast. "I just... can't."

Her shoulders dropped. Her voice softened.

"It's just hard for me. I adapted to her. To how she was." She meant her mother. "So I just became like this."

Her eyes welled up. I sat next to her.

"I found therapy helps sometimes," I said. "To process things that feel dead-end."

"Therapy?"

"Yeah. I can refer you to the one I'm seeing. Fully covered. Not much waiting list."

"If that's what you want." She wiped her face. "I'll go to therapy."

If that's what you want.

I went back to the sofa. Picked up my book. Read the same paragraph three times without absorbing it.

"I love youuu."

She drew out the word. Sing-song. Like we'd just come back from a good day.

The voices started.

Not hallucinations. The other kind. The ones that live in your head and speak with your voice but say things you'd never say out loud.

She's doing this on purpose. She wants you to break first. Stop trying to fix it.

I stayed still. Tried to keep it contained.

Ella scrolled like the phone mattered more than the room. More than me sitting three feet away, trying not to disappear.

My jaw was still tight from before. I didn't unclench it.

She stayed close. She always stayed close.

But staying wasn't the same as being present.

She started referencing my diagnosis in arguments. Not directly—she was smarter than that. But when I tried to explain how her silence affected me, she'd get that look. The one that said: *I know this isn't you, it's your depression.*

"You're being dramatic."

It became her favourite response to anything that required emotional labor from her.

"I never said that."

The sentence hit my chest and stayed there.

I went quiet again.

I became scared to talk.

She kept giving advice. Always advice.

"Did your mom teach you how to live alone?"

I'd told her about my executive function issues. Explained that the medication helped some things but not others. Asked her to be patient while I figured out systems that worked.

She'd nodded. Said she understood.

Then she said things like this.

"Why can't you clean like a normal person, instead of doing everything halfway and jumping to the next thing?"

"You don't eat healthy."

"Every time I wake up, it ruins my mood. Whatever you did the night before."

She never told me what made her feel that way—until it turned into name-calling.

When I tried to give advice back once—gently, about something small—her whole face changed.

She didn't say anything. Just a smirk. A slight pull at the corner of her mouth. Eyes that said: *you're an idiot. Your advice is useless.*

She went back to her phone.

The medication was supposed to bring me stable emotions, stable like when I was young, no, that's not it, I wasn't even stable back then, but this is the stable I'm supposed to want and I can't trust it, can't, it feels artificial like someone edited my reactions and called it health. Ella was in the living room on the couch, AirPods in, listening to something I can't hear, alien conspiracy, South Park, whatever, and I'm watching her like weather, cold or warm today, cold or warm today, and the orange pill makes me more aware, more scared, more tuned to the wrong frequencies, is it me or her, me or her, because she did that look again, the tiny eye roll when I'm talking, and maybe she's mad or maybe I'm dramatic like she said in the car when I asked why you changed, why you're different, no I'm wrong, I'm dramatic, she's always like this, and now my brain keeps replaying it like a clip I can't close.

My phone notifications buzzed, and the buzz felt like proof, I talk more with Juliette, Krzysztof, Chakra, even my notifications are mostly Juliette and Chakra or dumb reels from Krzysztof, and social media is supposed to be fake but the fake is the only thing that pings me back. Day to day, sun, sunset, brush teeth, drink water, university, become a person, happy and happy and work, that's the script, and I used to be talkative and now I just play games and forget how to talk, forget how to socialise, and I try to remember when the last time I properly went out was and the memory comes close then slips and then I remember.

Ella shifted on the sofa as I walked past, fabric drag, a small sound that still lands in my body like a verdict.

Crochet. Thread scraping soft. Silence but not silence, still the hums, the neighbour next door talking to birds like the birds are the only ones who answer, hours of background noises turning into days,

weeks, and I'm not alone because she's here in the same house, the same room, but she's not here, she's just present like furniture.

I went to the bedroom and I asked what's wrong and she said:

"Nothing wrong, I'm fine."

Fine, okay, I should trust what you said, fine means fine, but fine feels like punishment, fine feels like a door closed gently so I can't accuse it of slamming, and she sleeps more often and her face is elsewhere and the silence gets longer even when she's right next to me.

She brought me tea without asking that afternoon, set it on my desk, didn't say anything, steam rising like it wants to look caring without having to be caring. My brain immediately goes, what does she want, what did I do wrong, when will this be taken away.

I couldn't drink it.

My vision didn't cooperate that morning, the room stayed soft around the edges, bed, floor, my own arms distant like they belong to someone else. I blinked hard trying to make the world click into focus.

It didn't.

On the bedside table sat my medication bottles, *Desvenlafaxine*, the adjunct, the *dexies* hidden underneath, almost empty now. I tried to count what was left and my brain refused, refused to hold numbers, refused to be a container.

The pharmacy flashes in, card tap, beep, the pharmacist smile saying let me know if you have any questions, and I said no because I've taken this before, I know the script. The invoice after, too much, too much, bills, rent, groceries, meds, everything stacked and my mind won't stack anything, it just drops.

A sob.

I turn and it's Ella, and my body registers her crying before my brain can make it mean anything, and then I look down and there's blood on my wrist, warm and bright and stupid, like that time in

high school, like my body doing something before my brain can file it.

Quiet.

I panic, sorry sorry sorry, I'm scared, I'm scared, I should have disclosed everything before she chose me as a partner, but I didn't, and I'm not insane, I am not, I'm tired and I've tried and tried and tried, and she says nothing, just quiet, and I don't know what to do with the quiet.

Then I wake up and I can hear the fan again, the same rhythm, and I panic before she can wake up because every wake-up is Russian roulette, bullet or nothing, empty chamber or bullet, today or tomorrow.

I try to talk and she just hums:

"Mhm."

Then I notice the sheet, a dark stain dried into the fabric, old enough to stop being bright, not fresh, not new, just there like proof, like a receipt I don't remember asking for, blood from three nights ago, and I don't remember that one either.

Every sentence has become a calculation, I'm telling her about my day and halfway through I see her face shift, something I said, I don't know what, and I stop mid-sentence, edit, restart with something safer.

She looks at her phone anyway.

I used to doomscroll relationship advice like it was a manual.

Be blunt. Be direct. Communicate. Don't assume. Don't bottle. Don't spiral.

So I tried.

I tried to say it once, carefully, like I was holding something breakable. I tried to tell her about my concern. About what I'd been feeling lately. That I was scared to be open if she acted like this.

"What are you talking about?" she replied. "I've always been like this."

But she hadn't.

I remembered conversations. I remembered her laughing, explaining things, being present.

"Maybe you just never noticed before," she added.

Something cold settled in my stomach.

It had been one of the busiest weeks. I hadn't spent time with Ella except at home. Physically.

"I kind of changed my mind."

Juliette was coming over to pick up a book. I accidentally screamed to myself outside. Frustration boiled over before I could stop it.

"Why would you yell?" she asked when I came back.

"I just don't know what's wrong with all of this," I said. "Every time, there's something. You ignore me. Like I need to earn your warmth. Your usual self. I can't take this anymore."

She didn't answer right away. Her face did something I couldn't read.

"How can I recover that fast," she said, "after seeing your cuts?"

"That has nothing to do with you." My voice came out harder than I meant. "It was a mark. A story about myself."

"No." She shook her head. "Because I have trauma."

I waited.

"My online friend," she said. "He used to do it. Cut himself. Send me photos. He used it to manipulate me. To keep me close. To make me feel like I couldn't leave."

She looked at me like I was him.

"That's not what I'm doing," I said.

"I didn't say it was."

But she had. With her face. With the way she pulled back when she saw the marks. With the weeks of silence that followed.

I tried to calm her. Told her it was okay. That she could talk to me whenever things felt off.

"I don't know how," she said. "I don't know how to talk about problems. My parents—my mom especially—she just goes silent when she's mad. So I don't know."

"I don't have a friend," she cried.

"And I hate it when you cancel hanging out with your friends," I said. "I want friends too."

I looked at her. The words were already forming—*you give that treatment so easily to everyone else except me*—but they were too heavy. They wouldn't come out. Stuck somewhere between my chest and my throat.

"It's okay," I said instead. "We can share a Google calendar, you know."

She wiped her face. Nodded like that solved something.

"It was in front of everyone," I said. The words came out anyway, smaller than I wanted. "That's what made it hard for me. That's why I've been distancing myself from my friend slowly. I was hurt by that. By having to earn being treated like them. By you."

"I was just masking," she said. "It was probably the undiagnosed autism."

I didn't know what to say to that. She used it like a shield. The same diagnosis I had. The same one she'd dismissed in me when it was inconvenient.

I sat there. She cried. I didn't know whose pain was supposed to matter more.

Maybe she was right.

I stared at the ceiling that night, listing the evidence.

Too much. Too dramatic. Too broken. She stayed anyway.

She's autistic too, like me. Maybe she was masking with everyone else, and what she gave me was her real energy. Maybe she felt safe with me.

Maybe that was supposed to be enough.

I thought—if I was different this time. If I was open. If I didn't run.

But I couldn't be different enough to outrun the medication making me volatile. Couldn't be vulnerable enough to make Ella want to stay through the adjustment period. Couldn't be stable enough when the thing that was supposed to stabilise me was tearing me apart instead.

I could communicate perfectly and it wouldn't matter if the medication was making me someone Ella couldn't love.

I could be vulnerable and honest and open and it wouldn't matter if Ella wanted a finished product instead of a person in progress.

I could try—I could try so hard—and still end up alone. Holding cigarettes. Wondering what I did wrong this time.

The answer was: everything. And nothing. And I couldn't tell the difference anymore.

With Sofie, I was the one who didn't care. I was the one who laughed while she was low. I was the villain in that story, and I knew it.

With Ella, I didn't know who the villain was.

Maybe it was me. Maybe I was too much even when I was trying to be better.

Maybe it was her. Maybe she wasn't capable of supporting someone in crisis, no matter how much that person communicated.

Maybe it was the medication. The wrong diagnosis. The system that kept telling me to wait, adjust, see—while I fell apart in real time.

Maybe there was no villain. Just two people who couldn't reach each other across the chemical chaos in my brain.

I looked at the window and noticed the flowers had bloomed fully. Spring arrived the way it always did in the

Netherlands—aggressively optimistic, commercially packaged, designed for tourists who'd leave after the tulips died.

The flowers bloomed and wilted in the same breath. Allergies everywhere. Beauty as irritant.

I should have seen spring as renewal. Instead I saw it as proof: things bloom, then rot, and you're expected to call it hope.

VI

Late May heat pressed down. Summer arriving uninvited. The season people wait all winter for, and when it comes, it's too much.

The tulips were dying already. Peak bloom lasted three days. Now, brown edges, wilting stems, tourists photographing rot. Spring in the Netherlands never lasted.

Why did I think I would?

I sat on the bathroom floor with the door locked. Ella was in the other room. Sleeping. We'd had another fight, or she'd gone cold again, or I'd spiralled again. The details blurred together. Every day was a variation of the same disaster. It always ended in silences. I couldn't sleep every time it happened.

The *Desvenlafaxine* bottle sat on the counter. The medication that was supposed to help. The medication that made everything louder.

May increase suicidal thoughts in the first few weeks.

It had been five weeks. The thoughts hadn't decreased, they'd multiplied. The bottle sat on the counter under the bathroom light, plastic and label and fine print, more like a threat when you're already looking for one. When I picked it up the pills shifted with a soft rattle, too normal, too domestic. Orange capsules stacked like nothing. I looked at them through the plastic and the next thought wasn't logic, it was a tunnel. If this is the help and it isn't helping, then more might help more. If more doesn't help, then more might make it stop. If it stops, I stop. I tipped them into my palm. Orange.

Harmless-looking. Like vitamins. Like candy. My hand didn't feel like my hand, the lines in my palm too sharp, the capsules sitting there like evidence. I was scared, but the tired was heavier than the fear, the tired that makes fear feel like admin. I called Juliette on loudspeaker because loudspeaker means distance, loudspeaker means I don't have to hold anything except the decision.

"I don't know what to do."

"Lynn? What's going on?"

"I tried the hotline. It just keeps ringing. It keeps—" My mouth stopped and restarted like a glitch. "I don't know what to do."

"Where are you right now?"

The bathroom floor. The door locked. The lock in my vision like a dot you can't stop staring at. "My room," I lied, because bathroom makes it real.

"Ella's asleep. I can't wake her. She'll be mad. She'll say I'm trauma dumping again."

"Lynn. Listen to me. Are you safe?"

Safe. The trap word. Yes means lie. No means ambulance. Either way, someone writes it down and it becomes official. I looked at the pills in my hand. Orange. Still. Waiting.

"I don't know."

"Okay. Okay." Her voice went careful, too careful, the careful that means she's already seeing a stretcher. "Can you put down whatever you're holding?"

Put down, like it's a cup, like it's a pen, like it isn't the tunnel. My fingers curled tighter, capsules pressing little circles into my skin. I didn't answer.

"Lynn."

My name like a rope, like I'm supposed to grab it, like my hands are free. "I've never been this low," I whispered. "I'm scared."

"I know. I know you are. Can you unlock your door for me? Just unlock it and sit down. I'm going to stay on the phone."

Unlock. Sit down. Two steps. Simple. I stared at the lock like it belonged to someone else, like the door belonged to someone else, like the person who could unlock it belonged to someone else. I checked the time. 2:23 AM. Swallowed. Dry, no drama, just throat, just pill scraping down like nothing is happening while everything is happening. I checked the time again.

2:28 AM. Dex. Two. Swallowed. Dex, faster, always faster, the tunnel hates waiting. I checked the time again. 2:40 AM. One more. I checked the time again. 3:02 AM. More. Not counting, not thinking, not deciding, hand to mouth, hand to mouth, like a metronome, the part of me that wanted everything to stop doing what it does best, doing. Stop. Stop. Stop.

At some point the bathroom door opened. At some point Ella was there. At some point someone was crying and I couldn't tell whose throat it came from.

"What did you do?"

Her voice high and panicked.

"Lynn, what did you take?"

My mouth felt wrong, tongue heavy, teeth too present, my body far away behind glass like I was watching myself from the ceiling corner.

"Lynn!"

I tried to push sorry out, tried to push not planned out, tried to push the sentence that explains it, the medication was supposed to help but it made everything worse and I just wanted it to stop, I just— but the words wouldn't line up. My tongue couldn't keep up with my brain, or my brain couldn't keep up with reality, the gap between thought and speech turning physical.

Ella said something, she was on the phone, Emergency, ER, Ambulance, Dutch words snapping past like shards, I caught half then none. The room tilted. Then nothing lined up.

The next thing I remember clearly was the ambulance. Then the hospital. Fluorescent lights. The smell of antiseptic that never left your nostrils once it got in.

A nurse asked questions I couldn't follow.

"What did you take?"

"*Desvenlafaxine*," I said. "My antidepressant."

She wrote something down. "How much?"

"I don't know. A lot."

"Are you on any other medications?"

I thought about the *dexies*, hidden in my drawer at home, bought from Chakra because the system wouldn't give me what worked.

"No," I said.

More questions. More forms. Words I half-heard, serotonin syndrome, cardiac monitoring, psychiatric evaluation.

A doctor came eventually.

"The *Desvenlafaxine*," he said. "You were on 100mg? Recently increased?"

"Five weeks ago."

He nodded like this explained everything.

"The adjustment period for SNRIs can be difficult. Some patients experience increased suicidal ideation during dosage changes."

He said it clinically. Like it was a known side effect. Like it was acceptable.

"We'll need to reassess your treatment plan," he continued. "This is the second crisis since the increase?"

Second. He meant the bridge. The nights I'd been walking too close to edges and calling it fresh air.

"The medication to fix the problem made the problem worse," I said. My voice didn't sound like mine.

He didn't answer that. Just wrote more notes.

"Do you have support at home?"

I thought of Ella. Somewhere in this hospital. The person who'd watched me do this.

"I don't know," I said.

It was the most honest thing I'd said all night.

They kept me for observation.

Forty-eight hours of fluorescent light and nurses checking on me every fifteen minutes like I might disappear if they looked away.

At some point they moved me into a different waiting room. Not the normal one. The one where the doors locked from the outside.

The mental ward waiting room.

I sat in a plastic chair bolted to the floor. The walls were beige. The kind of beige that was supposed to calm you down but just made everything feel dead.

I could hear screaming.

Not close. Somewhere down a hallway, behind closed doors, someone was screaming. Not words. Just sound. Raw and animal and endless.

It stopped.

Then it started again.

Chakra, Krzysztof, and Juliette were in the regular waiting room. They weren't allowed in here. Only Ella had come back with me, and now she sat three chairs away, staring at her hands. Not crying anymore. Just empty.

We didn't look at each other.

The space between us felt wider than three chairs. It felt like an ocean. Like we were on different continents and the water was rising.

I wanted to say something. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. I don't know what happened. But the words got stuck in the gap where everything important always got lost.

So I sat there.

The chair was beige plastic, bolted to the floor. Warm where my thighs touched it. Down the hall, someone screamed. Not words.

Just sound. It stopped. Started again. Stopped. The nurses didn't react. The screaming was normal here. Part of the air.

Fluorescent light buzzed above me. Not loud. Just constant. The kind of sound you stop hearing until you notice you've been clenching your jaw.

Through the window—locked, thick glass, —a tree. Fully leafed. That dark green that means spring is already over. Late May. Summer coming.

The tree didn't know I was here.

Nothing outside knew. I'd missed the transition entirely.

Ella visited once during the forty-eight hours. Brought my phone charger and a change of clothes. She sat in the chair next to my bed and didn't say anything for a long time.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't plan it. It just—happened."

"I know." Her voice was flat. "The doctor said it's a side effect of the medication."

"It is."

"Okay."

Silence. The kind that felt like a wall.

"I don't know if I can do this," she said finally.

My chest went cold. "Do what?"

"This. Us. The constant crisis." She stopped, started again like she was trying to phrase it in a way that wouldn't sound cruel. "I have my own stuff going on, Lynn. My own mental health to manage. And I can't keep being your—"

"I never asked you to be my therapist."

"You didn't have to ask." She looked down at her hands. "It just happened. Every conversation is about your medication, your mood, your struggle. I don't have room to have problems anymore."

I stared at her. "I tried to ask you. I tried to make space for your stuff—"

"When?" she cut in. "When you weren't in crisis?"

The same words from the fight. The one before the bridge. The one before the pills.

"I'm always in crisis," I said quietly. "That's the point. The medication is wrong. The doctors won't listen to me. I'm doing everything I can—"

"Are you, though?"

The question hung there. Quiet. Devastating. I couldn't breathe.

After she left, I lay in the hospital bed and stared at the ceiling until it stopped feeling like a ceiling and started feeling like a lid.

I tried to trace back the arguments. Every single one ended with me apologising. Even the ones she started. Even the ones where I'd done nothing wrong. I didn't know how that kept happening. I just knew it did.

I thought about Sofie.

With Sofie I'd shut down. I'd run. I'd made her carry everything alone until she couldn't. With Ella I'd tried to do it differently. I'd told her when things were bad. I'd shown her everything. I'd said the words out loud instead of hiding them.

And I still ended up here.

Maybe the pattern wasn't about what I did wrong. Maybe it was about being too broken for anyone to hold, no matter how careful I was. No matter how honest. Or maybe it was about being treated for the wrong thing. Given the wrong medication. Failed by a system that couldn't see what was actually wrong.

I didn't know anymore. I was too tired to decide which explanation hurt less.

Chakra came on the second day. Brought contraband coffee and a tired smile.

"You scared the shit out of me," he said, sitting in the chair Ella had vacated.

"Sorry."

"Don't apologise." He handed me the coffee. "The *Desvenlafaxine*?"

I nodded.

"Fuck." He ran his hand through his hair. "You overdosed on antidepressants."

"It was supposed to help," I said. My voice didn't sound like mine.

"I know." He looked at me with something I'd never seen on his face before. Fear. "They're going to flag your file now. Every prescription, every refill, they'll be watching."

"Good," I said. "Maybe they'll finally try something different."

"Dumbass." He exhaled hard. "It means stricter prescriptions. Stimulants will be harder for them to prescribe. You know you need them."

He wasn't pissed for him. He was pissed for me. For the consequences that would land on my body, my brain, my future.

He leaned back in the chair, jaw tight.

Mood disorder. That was my category, even when the mood medication almost killed me.

"I think it's not depression," I said. "The antidepressants make me worse. Every time. And the *dexies*—"

"But you can't tell them that," he said. "You know how it sounds."

Addict. Drug-seeking. Non-compliant.

I knew exactly how it sounded.

"The study drugs help more than anything they've prescribed," I said. "Doesn't that mean something?"

"It means something to you and me," he said. "It doesn't mean anything to them."

He paused, then asked, "How's Ella?"

I looked away. "She came once. Said she doesn't know if she can do this anymore."

"Shit." He rubbed his face. "I'm sorry."

"I tried to do everything different," I said. "I communicated. I told her what I needed. I didn't shut down like I did with Sofie. And it still—" I stopped. Swallowed. "It still wasn't enough."

Chakra was quiet for a moment.

Then he said, "Maybe it was never about what you did."

"Then what was it about?"

"She couldn't hold your pain." He looked at me steadily. "That's not your fault."

"It feels like my fault."

"Most things do," he said.

I wanted to believe him.

I wasn't sure I could.

They let me go home. Because the beds were full. Because I lied convincingly enough about feeling safe.

Krzysztof drove. Juliette sat in the back with me. Ella sat in the front, staring out the window. Chakra was on my other side.

No one talked.

When we got back to my apartment, Juliette helped me inside. Krzysztof said something to Ella I couldn't hear. Keys jingled. She nodded, got in her car, and left. She didn't come back that night.

Ella stayed at her parents.

She didn't come back that night.

Ella stayed at her parents.

Juliette stayed for a while. Made tea I didn't drink. Sat on the floor next to me. Didn't try to make me talk. Didn't act like my breakdown was a personal inconvenience.

Eventually she said, "I want to offer you something and I need you to hear it before you say no."

I looked at her.

"Tonight, you can stay with me. Krzysztof too."

"I'm okay," I said "I'm fine, here"

"Okay." She stood up. "I'll come back tomorrow."

She hesitated at the door. “Lynn. are you sure?”

But I just nodded again.

She left. Silence again. My throat tightened. My tongue screamed to explain. To apologise. To tell her no it wasn't like this it wasn't like that I'm not just testing them I'm not draining I just don't know how I am becoming like this again and again I don't know how it got this bad.

I sat in my apartment, alone, with the blood still on the sheets I’d forgotten to change.

Not bright anymore. Not fresh. Just there, dried into the fabric like a receipt. Proof that something had happened even if I couldn’t remember it cleanly. And I thought about the difference between how Krzysztof and Juliette had responded and how Ella had.

Ella had been scared of me.

My friends were scared for me.

The difference mattered. It wasn’t semantic. It wasn’t tone. It was where the fear pointed. The sentence from months ago came back the way guilt comes back. Not as dialogue. As instruction.

Unless you hurt me.

And suddenly everything counted as potential harm.

My sadness. My silence. My panic. My need.

Even my honesty started to look like a weapon I could accidentally pick up.

I started living like I was on probation, trying to predict what would count as damage before I even opened my mouth. They discharged me with a new prescription. Different antidepressant. Lower dose. Same leaflet. Same legal language pretending it was care.

I stared at the leaflet in my hand. May increase suicidal thoughts in the first few weeks. I almost laughed. I knew exactly what “the first few weeks” meant.

I threw the prescription away.

That was the moment I stopped believing recovery was something you could follow like instructions. The system wanted compliance.

I wanted to stay alive.

We didn't break up. Not officially. We just shifted into something that wasn't quite a relationship anymore. She stayed in the apartment because her name was on the lease now. I stayed because I had nowhere else to go.

We slept in the same bed but didn't touch. We ate meals together but didn't talk. We existed in the same space like two ghosts haunting the same house.

I tried to give her space. Tried to not be in crisis. Tried to manage the new medication's adjustment period without dragging her into it. It didn't matter. The damage was done. I thought about the pattern.

With Sofie, I shut down. With Ella, I didn't.

Same result.

Maybe the common denominator was me. Too broken. Too much. Too sick in ways no one could hold. Or maybe it was the system. The wrong diagnoses. The wrong medications. The waiting lists and the dismissals and the "adjustment periods" that almost killed me.

I didn't know anymore.

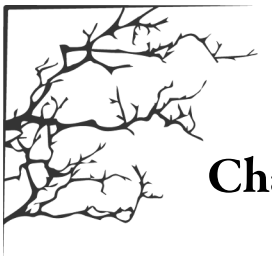
All I knew was this: the *dexies* in my drawer were almost empty. The only thing that ever helped. I took one. Felt my brain quiet. Felt something like stability for the first time in weeks.

The system would call this drug-seeking. Self-medicating. Addict behaviour.

I called it survival.

Outside, late May continued into June. Spring tourists packed up and headed home. Soon it would be summer. Soon I'd have enough distance to see the spring clearly.

I didn't know yet if that would help.



Chapter 4: Summer 2023

I

The sun started to burn. It was still cold, but I could feel the heat underneath.

Summer was beginning in that quiet way it does here, the light lingering too long, the day stretching past where it should end. The sun rose earlier than it used to and stayed later, as if it didn't know when to leave.

I stayed like that too. Lingering.

Holding on to whatever I still had, even when I couldn't tell what it was anymore.

Tomorrow, Bunga would be back in Maastricht.

***Bunga**: Lynn, are you okay?*
***Bunga**: Tell me if something happened.*
***Lynn**: im okay. See you tomorrow.*

I was supposed to reply last week. I didn't.

Tomorrow we were hosting a dinner to welcome her back. Bunga hadn't met Ella yet. After all this time, she still hadn't met Ella. Bunga had been in Finland since last fall. Chakra, Giovanni, and Juliette were the only ones who knew what this relationship looked like from the inside.

Tomorrow, Bunga would see for herself.

Ella was lying next to me on the bed, scrolling through her phone. Close, but not here.

I used to look for reasons to get better. First to function. Then to be stable. Then to be loveable. Or loved.

It didn't matter anymore.

As long as my mind shut up. That was the only reason that stayed.

The dinner was at Krzysztof's place. I'd forgotten when Krzysztof and Giovanni bonded. I think it started with Fortnite.

Chakra was already there, he'd cooked and prepared everything.

I stood in front of the door. Ella had left earlier. I'd been waiting at the park, planning to arrive together. But Krzysztof texted, saying Ella was already inside.

"Open up," I said into the intercom.

"Wait a second. Coming down," Krzysztof's voice crackled back.

He opened the door. I walked up the stairs.

Ella and Chakra were there. Juliette too.

I'd taken a *dex* at 4 PM. It should've been working by now. The only thing that kept me functional anymore.

We'd told Bunga to arrive at 6. We'd all come early.

I could see Ella from across the room. She looked unusual. Or usual. I didn't know the difference anymore. I'd stopped trying to read her. Barely noticed her body language, her expressions, the small shifts that used to tell me everything.

I'd put down the trigger. Stopped looking for the signs.

Bunga rang the bell. Krzysztof went downstairs. I waited next to Ella. She seemed normal. Leaned into me. Tried to hold my hand.

In front of others, she did this. When it was just the two of us, she barely touched me. I wondered if I should hang out with friends more often, just to experience the version of Ella who filled in the blanks.

When Bunga arrived, Giovanni stood up from the couch. Face flat.

"Welcome back from Finland. You've missed a lot. This," he gestured at Ella with the formality of a museum guide "is Ella. Lynn's girlfriend. She's real. We've verified."

Ella laughed. Open, bright. The version of her I used to get.

"Hi," she said, warmly, extending her hand.

"I've heard so much about you."

They connected immediately. Bunga lit up. I watched Ella be effortless with someone she'd just met, and I tried to remember the last time she'd been that effortless with me. The smell of soto ayam filled the apartment. Chakra was in the kitchen, waiting for it to heat enough.

I was just there.

My phone buzzed. Juliette.

> ***Juliette**: Lynn, can you tell that dumbass I'm already here. I tried calling him several times.*

I typed: **yeah, sure**

I told Krzysztof that Juliette was downstairs. He asked me to go get her, he was in the middle of a match.

I walked down.

"Hey, he's busy in a game."

"Krzysztof being Krzysztof." Juliette smiled, but it faded when she looked at me. "Anyway, how are you, Lynn? Haven't seen you in a while."

"I'm good. Just living as usual."

"Are you okay? Two days ago you told me you were having a panic attack. We were supposed to have lunch together. Then you told me it's alright, no need to come—"

Two days ago. The panic attack.

Ella was supposed to come with me to meet Juliette. But I'd told Ella I cancelled. I couldn't bear the feeling. I thought I'd communicated clearly. But it still happened.

I just wasn't mentally there. Not like today, when I'd prepared. Timed the *dex* precisely. Tried to make sure I'd be functional.

That afternoon, two days ago, I'd frozen. Couldn't walk outside. I could hear my heartbeat through my ears. Then tears, falling without permission.

I'd looked at Ella from across the room.

She did nothing at first. Just rolled a joint. Took several puffs in the bathroom.

Then she came back. Lay down next to me. Tried to calm me down.

I didn't understand it. Didn't understand her.

Juliette had tried to calm me over text. I'd assured her it was alright. I was okay. Ella was taking care of me.

"Yeah," I said to Juliette now. "I'm doing well. Ella really took care of me—"

"Look, Lynn." Juliette's voice dropped. "I'm the only one you tell everything. The overdramatic, overreacting incidents, that's not you. That's unusual."

"It's okay, Juliette."

We went back upstairs.

didn't remember what happened next.

Then I looked at the time.

An hour and forty-one minutes gone.

The next thing I remembered, all of my friends holding me.

"Are you okay? Calm down, Lynn." Bunga's voice, close to my ear.

I could see Ella on the other side of the room. Crying, as usual.

"It's okay." Juliette's hand on my shoulder. "From what you told me those previous days. When you were having panic attacks. You called me. I know you tried to make everything seem fine."

"Lynn, I'm being serious." Giovanni's voice, harder than I'd ever heard it. "Please break up with her. I haven't seen you like this before.

I never even saw you look really down over the past month since I've known you."

I didn't know what had happened. Not only that, but I was trying not to make Ella look bad. I just, I didn't understand.

I'd been happy, hadn't I? Laughing. Talking to Bunga.

Then what?

I saw Bunga move to Ella's side now. Trying to calm her down. Chakra crouched next to me. Explained quietly what I'd done. I'd yelled. Screamed about whatever was in my mind. Screamed for it to stop. Said it was looping, and I couldn't handle it anymore.

I'd tried to bang my head against the wall. Thrown my phone. Gone full insane, he said.

Screamed: "Please accommodate me one more time. I can't handle my fucked-up mind anymore."

I didn't remember any of it.

Giovanni's words hung there. Please break up with her.

But Giovanni didn't know. He'd only seen me down for a month. He didn't have the full picture. He was just reacting to tonight.

Chakra was different.

He hadn't said anything since he'd explained what I'd done. Hadn't offered advice. Hadn't told me what to do. He just sat next to me, close enough that our shoulders touched, and watched Ella across the room with an expression I couldn't read.

Not judgment. Not pity.

Recognition.

Like he was watching something he'd seen before. Something he knew the shape of.

He didn't tell me to break up with her. Didn't tell me anything. Just stayed close. Like he knew that sometimes the only thing you can do is be there when someone isn't ready to see what you already see.

Juliette pulled me aside later. Into the hallway, away from everyone.

"Lynn." Her voice was careful. The way you talk to someone standing too close to an edge. "Those calls. The panic attacks. The spiralling."

"I'm fine—"

"You called me six times last week. Six. And every time, you told me Ella was there. That she was helping. That it was okay." She paused. "But you kept calling."

I didn't say anything.

"If she was helping, why did you keep calling me?"

The question sat between us. Heavy. Obvious.

I hadn't thought about it like that. I'd just, needed to hear Juliette's voice. Needed someone who didn't make me feel like my crisis was an inconvenience— who didn't go quiet or cry or make it about themselves.

"I don't know," I said.

"I think you do."

She didn't let it sit this time. That was new.

"Lynn, I need to say something and you're not going to like it."

I wasn't ready.

"You're paying rent. Groceries. Her GP appointments. Her weed. And she's—" Juliette stopped. Restarted, like she was choosing her words the way you choose where to cut.

"What is she contributing?"

"Ella's going through stuff too," I said.

"I know." Juliette's voice didn't waver. "But that's not what I asked."

"That was way too much for someone that only knew each other for less than a year."

I wanted to argue. Wanted to explain that it wasn't like that. That anyone would struggle to hold me. But the words wouldn't come. I knew why I kept calling Juliette instead of talking to Ella. I knew why

the panic attacks happened more often when Ella was home than when she wasn't.

I knew why I felt more alone next to her than I did actually alone.

I just wasn't ready to know it out loud.

Across the room, Chakra caught my eye.

He didn't say anything. Didn't nod. Didn't give me any kind of signal.

He just looked at me.

I've been where you are. I know how this ends. And I'm sorry I can't make you see it faster.

But he didn't say any of that. Because he knew, the way only someone who's lived it knows, that you can't tell someone they're being abused. They have to find the word themselves.

All you can do is stay close. And wait. And be there when they're finally ready.

I pulled out my pill case. Hands shaking. Took another *dex*.

9:55 PM.

The *dex* should work in thirty minutes.

I tried to calm down.

9:56 PM

Still.

10:02 PM.
10:08 PM.
10:16 PM.

I was dangerous. I didn't want to see those eyes anymore. The way everyone looked at me now. Scared. Careful.

Every time I tried to get better, something worse happened.

Was I too dangerous to live? Too dangerous to love someone?

I just wanted to be normal. Was I going to lose Ella?

I didn't know what Bunga and Ella were talking about. I just watched from a distance.

Please. Please calm me down. I'm scared.

Bunga approached me.

"Lynn, she told me she's too scared to tell you things because of how you'll react."

And just like that, the moment closed.

Ella's fear. Ella's trauma. Ella's needs.

I'd told Ella before, I'd rather hear what I don't want to hear. My mind won't shut up otherwise. Creates scenarios worse than reality.

But she was scared of my reactions. She was the victim here. I was the one who was too much.

Right?

I looked at Juliette. She was watching Bunga with an expression I couldn't read.

I looked at Chakra. He'd looked away. Jaw tight. Like he was holding something back.

I didn't understand then. Why they reacted like that. Why Bunga's words landed differently for them than they did for me.

I approached Ella.

I tried to read her face. Couldn't. The data wasn't landing.

Her mouth was set in a line. Her eyes were—something. I couldn't decode it. The algorithm that usually ran automatic was buffering, frozen, returning nothing.

She looked at me. I looked at her.

I should adjust. I should soften my face, drop my shoulders, make myself smaller, less threatening. I knew the steps. My body wouldn't execute them.

"Hey," I said. My voice came out wrong. Too flat. I heard it and couldn't correct it.

She didn't respond.

I stood there. My hands didn't know where to go. I put them in my pockets. Took them out. Crossed my arms. That was defensive. Uncrossed them.

Everything I did was visible. I couldn't find the mask. It was supposed to be automatic and it wasn't.

We had surface conversations. I said words. She said words. I couldn't track whether mine matched what the situation needed.

Everyone could see. I was sure of it. The performance had collapsed and I was just standing there, exposed, all the machinery visible.

But I felt it. The exclusion. The way she pulled back. The way I didn't exist to her in any way that mattered.

I didn't remember what happened then.

I just felt it.

The same feeling from four years ago. Year 12. Jakarta. The isolation. The fear that I was too much. That no one wanted me around. That I was the problem.

I just wish I could see the world through a child's iris, not a crooked one.

II

Later that night, after everyone had calmed down, after Ella had stopped crying, after the surface conversations had run their course, I found myself alone in Krzysztof's bathroom. I looked in the mirror.

The person looking back was someone I didn't recognise.

Was this what getting better looked like? I thought about all the things I'd done. I'd gone to therapy. I'd taken the medications. I'd communicated with Ella. I'd been vulnerable. I'd asked for help.

I'd done everything right. And I was still here, in a bathroom, at a party, trying to remember the last hour and a half of my life. The medication was supposed to help. The relationship was supposed to help. The therapy was supposed to help.

Instead, I was more broken than ever.

I thought about the questions I should have asked three months ago, when the psychiatrist increased my dosage: If the medication works, if it makes me stable, if it makes me someone who can survive university— I survived. But I didn't survive as me.

Who was I becoming? And who could survive the transformation with me?

When I came out of the bathroom, Ella was waiting.

"Hey," I said. "I'm sorry."

She didn't respond. She didn't nod.

"We'll figure it out," I said. "Right?"

She walked back into the party. Her expression, like a switch flipped up. She smiled. Again. Maybe she forced it in the crowd.

I wanted to believe her. Still, she didn't even look at me. But I'd wanted to believe countless things. That communication would fix everything. That trying harder would be enough. That the medication would help. That the system would listen.

None of it had been true.

I stood in the hallway, waiting for the *dex* to fully kick in, wondering if anything would ever feel stable again.

The semester ended. Summer arrived. Ella and I kept pretending.

I kept taking the *dexies*. Kept surviving.

The pattern wasn't broken. It was just paused. Waiting for the next crisis. The next adjustment period. The next time everything fell apart. But I was still here. Still standing. Still holding on. Maybe that was enough. For now. Maybe that had to be enough.

Outside, the light lasted until nearly 10 PM now. Summer in the Netherlands. The season of endless days. I didn't know if that was a promise or a threat.

The tulips were long dead. The tourists had moved on. The city settled into that quiet summer rhythm of locals who stayed and students who didn't.

I stayed.

Not because I had somewhere better to go. Because I didn't have anywhere else. No home to return to. No family that understood. No system that would help. Just me. And the pills. And the hope that maybe, eventually, something would work.

I go until I'm nothing but ache, I guess now I'm in ache. My limit.

But I hadn't stopped yet. That had to count for something.

Didn't it?

My phone buzzed.

***Ella**: I can't do this anymore.*
***Ella**: I will finally talk like how you want.*

I stared at the message. Didn't respond.

It was supposed to be a break. A two-week break after the incidents. She'd told me she needed time to process. Still exclusive, she'd said. Just space.

It had been four days.

Four days of silence. She knew I couldn't handle silence, knew about the voices, the loops, the way my brain created scenarios worse than reality when no one would tell me what was real.

She knew. And she went silent anyway.

Now this. I can't do this anymore. What did that mean? Was it over? Everything? Why did this always happen whenever I tried to talk about my feelings? Whenever did I treat her the same way she treated me?

I didn't respond. What was there to say?

The next day, we had the talk.

She came to my place still wearing her gym clothes. Didn't even bother to change. Like this conversation wasn't worth the effort. Like I wasn't worth the effort. She stood in the middle of my room, arms crossed, and started.

"I want to break up."

The words landed flat. No emotion. No hesitation. Like she'd rehearsed them.

"Can we talk?" I said. "Give me a chance, it's been a rough week for me. Therapy was already scheduled, I've always been—"

"You even missed your therapy last time."

"I only missed once. I was busy. Work, the visa, studying—"

"You're just selfish."

The word hit before I could brace for it.

"You only think about yourself. You're mentally too ill to be in a relationship. You need therapy. Not me because I can't talk. I gave you a chance."

"A chance?" My voice cracked. "When?"

She didn't answer.

Every decision I'd made had been a performance review. A silent, invisible test. I never knew when I'd be fired. I never knew the criteria. I just knew I was always failing.

One-sided. It had always been one-sided.

If I hurt her, she left. If she hurt me, was it wrong to stand up for myself?

"You just point everything at me," she said.

"I paid for groceries. Even your GP appointments."

I had paid for groceries. I had paid for her GP appointments. I had paid for all of her weed, found cheaper sources through Chakra so her money wouldn't drain on addiction. I never asked for rent. Never asked for bills. Never asked for anything.

Bunga had told me I was doing too much. Had told me our relationship was unusual, the way I carried it. Bunga had barely met Ella, and still she'd worried about me.

But I couldn't say any of this. My lips wouldn't move. My jaw locked the way it always did when I needed to defend myself. Like my body had learned that self-advocacy was dangerous.

"That was the bare minimum," Ella said. "You should've done more. I clean and cook too. You should give me an allowance."

Allowance.

"Bare minimum," I repeated. "Does that even exist?"

She didn't answer.

"I'm sorry, Ella," I said. "For those things I said. The way I behaved. We were both too emotional to talk when we argued last time. I'm sorry for—"

"Sorry?" She cut me off. "You say sorry again and again. You always apologise."

"Isn't that—"

"You only do that to feel better about yourself. Apologising is selfish."

I blinked.

Selfish. For apologising.

"I don't feel safe around you," she continued. "I don't want to be in a relationship where I don't feel safe. You're violent with all of those things you did."

Violent.

I thought about the scars on my wrists. The ones I'd made on myself. The violence I'd directed inward because of the guilt I carried. The hatred toward myself. Because I hurt someone.

I thought about her silence. Her coldness. The way she'd trained me to believe my needs were unreasonable.

Which one of us was violent?

"Selfish," she said again. "When I was sad, you just looked at me confused. Didn't even try to calm me down. Even sex. Even everything. You're just selfish. Never think about me."

My lips wouldn't move. My jaw stayed locked.

My body had learned, defending yourself loads another bullet.

"Your mental health is all your fault," she said. "You're always too busy with work and studying—"

"I need it to survive."

My voice came out flat. Steady. Something had shifted.

"I don't have the same passport that gives access to the whole world like you do."

She blinked.

"Tell me what to change," I said.

"You're mentally too ill to be in a relationship."

She said it like a diagnosis. Like a verdict. Like she was the psychiatrist now, the one who got to decide what I was.

"That time," she added, "instead of you going to therapy, after you told me you can't talk about your problems, you just asked me to go to therapy as well. You're the one who needs therapy. You're the one who's too mentally ill to be in a relationship."

"Please—"

The word escaped before I could stop it. The old reflex.

But I caught myself. Stopped. Looked at her.

And didn't finish the sentence.

"Even after all of those things happened, I still stayed," she said. "I still slept next to you in your bed."

Like that was generosity. Like her physical presence, while emotionally absent, was a gift I should be grateful for.

"I want to break up," she said again. "If you actually want to do something for me, we break up. That's it."

If I wanted to do something for her. Like helping me meant abandoning me. Like the kindest thing she could do was leave.

"I still want you to be in my life," I said.

"We can be friends. I don't care."

"No. I can't. After everything. After this."

I looked at her eyes. They were different. Cold. Empty.

I didn't know who this person was. She'd never really seen me. She'd seen the performance. The version of me that didn't require

anything from her. The moment I'd shown her my real face, scarred, struggling, imperfect, she'd decided I was too much.

I used to think love was the thing that mattered. The feeling. The spark. The way your chest aches when you see them.

But love fades. That's what no one tells you. It fades and comes back and fades again, that's just human nature. You get bored. You fall out of love. You can fall back in.

What matters isn't the feeling. It's the relationship. The act. The commitment you make when the feeling isn't enough to carry you.

Two people becoming one means you carry each other when one of you can't walk.

Every relationship is hard. Not fun. Not just happy. It's living with a plus one. Making two people become one. Working on it every day, not because it feels good, but because you signed up for it. But that only works if both people keep choosing it.

She stopped choosing.

Something cracked inside me. Not broke, cracked. Like a door opening that I'd kept locked so long I'd forgotten it existed.

I'd been clean for six months before I met her. Six months of holding it together. And then I'd let myself believe that someone could love me without conditions. Without requiring me to hide the parts of myself that needed tending.

I'd thought I was recovered. She called it relapse. Blamed me for it.

But standing here now, looking at her cold eyes, I realised something I couldn't un-realise.

"You know what?" I said.

My jaw was still tight. My throat still resistant. But the door had cracked open. And something was pushing through.

"The absence of you these past few days, I realised something."

"This relationship, the problem was our communication," I said.

She nodded, like I finally agreed with her.

"Even the best communication in the world won't fix a relationship," she said.

"No." My voice came out steady. Calm. Not angry. Not pleading. Just true. "I still believe it could. Communication isn't the problem."

"Then what—"

"I was fine before."

The words landed in the space between us.

"I was fine before you. Stable. Recovering. Holding it together."

I looked at her. Really looked. Saw her for what she was, not a villain, not a monster, just a person who couldn't hold someone else's pain. A person who needed me to be easy. A person who punished me when I wasn't.

"You were the reason for all of this all along."

Her face shifted. Confusion. Then anger.

But I was already done.

"Goodbye, Ella."

After she was gone, I sat on the floor. Blood-stained sheets still on the bed. Pill bottles on the nightstand. Scars on my wrists, evidence of what she'd called my fundamental wrongness.

That's how she'd looked at them. Like proof that I was broken. Like justification for leaving.

I thought about the hospital. How she'd sat three chairs away while I fell apart. How Giovanni had said "Please break up with her" while Ella cried. How everyone had been comforting Ella while I banged my head against the wall.

I'd thought that meant they were all against me.

Now I wondered if they'd been trying to protect me. From her.

I thought about what Krzysztof had said. Months ago. McDonald's. Nuggets going cold while I tried to explain why I'd ended up on the bridge.

Some people can't hold someone else's pain. That doesn't mean you did something wrong.

I hadn't believed him then.

I didn't have a home. Not here. Not in Jakarta. Not anywhere.

But maybe home wasn't a place. Maybe it wasn't even a person. Maybe home was just knowing the difference between being alone and being with someone who made you disappear.

Mine.

My phone buzzed.

***Giovanni**: Juliette told me. Are you okay?*

I stared at the message. A few minutes later, another one.

***Giovanni**: I read the poem btw. The one you sent me. It's not bad.*

He'd asked to read it months ago. I'd sent it eventually, during a week when I was too tired to be self-conscious. He'd never mentioned it until now.

I wasn't okay. But I was better than I'd been three hours ago.

I typed back: **"I will be."**

And for the first time in a long time, I believed it — just like the beginning.

III

We got in his car. The seats were cold. I pulled my sleeves over my hands.

The autobahn was grey and flat. Fields on either side, wind turbines in the distance. Krzysztof put on some playlist. I didn't ask what. I watched the road markers pass.

Aachen appeared slowly. Buildings replacing farmland. Tram tracks. People walking somewhere.

The sushi place was on a side street. Running sushi—conveyor belt, small plates circling past. Sixteen euros for lunch. The laminated menu was sticky at the edges.

We ordered too much on purpose. All you can eat. Literally.

The salmon came first. Then tuna. Then something fried I didn't know the name of. Krzysztof ate like he was solving a problem. Methodical. I picked at the rice. Then found myself actually hungry. The wasabi cleared something in my head. Sharp. Brief. The plates piled up. Krzysztof stacked his empties into a tower, then reached for mine.

"Wait—"

But he was already balancing them. Two towers of plates, leaning against each other.

"Twin towers," he said.

I laughed. Too loud. The kind that makes other tables look.

"You're going to hell," I said.

"We both are."

We walked through the centre after. Different from Maastricht. Busier. More bodies, more languages overlapping. German, Turkish, English, something I couldn't place.

We passed the *Elisenbrunnen*. The old thermal fountain. Krzysztof stopped near it.

"Smell that?"

Sulphur. Rotten eggs. The water steamed in the cold air.

"It's drinkable," he said. "Healing properties or some shit."

"You first."

He actually cupped his hands under the tap. Drank. Made a face.

"Tastes like healing," he said. Wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

Behind the fountain, a park. The cathedral in the distance, tall and dark against the grey sky. People used to come here to be healed. Centuries ago. Now it was just tourists and students passing through.

We kept walking. Krzysztof talked about exams, fines, a lecturer who'd failed half the class. I listened. Let his voice fill the space.

Then I heard it.

Indonesian. A woman on her phone, half a block ahead. Laughing. The words reached me before and something in my chest tightened. I hadn't heard it in weeks. My own language. The sounds my mother used.

The woman turned a corner. Gone. I didn't follow. Just stood there for a second too long.

Krzysztof looked back. "Are you good?"

"Yeah," I said. "Just—thought I heard something."

He nodded. Didn't push. We kept walking. I let it work.

IV

It had been several weeks since that. I came back into the present. The difference was stark. Here, with Krzysztof, Giovanni, and Juliette, silence didn't feel like punishment. When Giovanni got too high, when Krzysztof got agitated, when Juliette got quiet, it wasn't about me. It wasn't my job to fix or anticipate or perform. It was just people being people. Messy and imperfect and present.

My phone buzzed.

***Krzysztof**: Fortnite?*
***Giovanni**: Yeah*
***Juliette**: I'm at the library, be there in 20*

I read it, then put the phone down.

At first it was just Krzysztof and me, two people killing time because time kept trying to kill us back. Then Giovanni joined, loud enough to make the room feel less sharp. Then Juliette, arriving late with coffee and complaints about her thesis. Soon it was four of us on one screen, crowded shoulder to shoulder, united by the dumbest possible objective: chicken dinner.

Tonight we met at Krzysztof's place. Giovanni brought his Xbox. Krzysztof had his PS5. Four people on two screens, yelling at pixels, pretending it counted as quality time. It did.

Giovanni also brought a bag of weed. He didn't say where it came from. He said "cheap" like it was a joke and not a warning.

"This looks off," Juliette said, holding it up.

Giovanni rolled his eyes. Krzysztof smirked. I shrugged because I'd already walked here, and I wasn't going to be the moral centre of the room.

Juliette and I stayed sober. We'd already decided. Someone had to remain functional.

Krzysztof tried it. Giovanni tried it and started narrating his experience like he was live-streaming. The match loaded. Someone died immediately. We laughed, the normal amount.

Then Giovanni stopped laughing. He sank back into the couch like gravity had doubled. His eyes went slightly past the TV, not focused on anything real.

"Porco dio," he said, thick and slow. "My head's so heavy. Like a gorilla standing on me."

Juliette looked at me. I looked at the bag.

Krzysztof wasn't slumped. He leaned forward, elbows on knees, jaw working like he was chewing on a thought. His leg started bouncing. Fast. Then faster.

"This fucking cheap shit," he muttered. His eyes were too wide. "Giovanni, where'd you get this?"

Giovanni tried to answer but his words came out wrong, disconnected syllables that didn't form sentences.

"It's sprayed," I said. Flat. Certain.

Juliette stood up immediately. "Water. Now."

She moved to the kitchen. I stayed on the couch between Krzysztof and Giovanni, one sinking, one spiralling. The game kept going on the screen. Our characters stood motionless. The storm closed in around them.

Juliette came back with water bottles. Giovanni took one, held it, forgot what it was for. Krzysztof drank his in three gulps, then stood up and sat back down, then stood again.

"I need air," he said. "Fuck. I can't, my heart's going too fast."

"You're okay," Juliette said. Calm. Practiced. "It's just the spray. It'll pass."

She'd done this before. I could tell. Her voice had that particular steadiness people develop after watching too many friends have bad reactions. Same Juliette who worked through Quantitative Methods like it was a puzzle while Krzysztof and I cried. Same steadiness.

My phone buzzed inside my bag.

I ignored it. Giovanni was trying to stand and failing. Krzysztof was pacing now, hands in his hair, breathing too fast.

"Krzysztof, sit down," I said. "You're making it worse."

"I can't sit. I can't, everything's wrong."

The phone buzzed again.

"Lynn, can you check that?" Juliette said. She was trying to get Giovanni to drink water, guiding the bottle to his mouth like he was a child.

I pulled out my phone.

***Chakra**: Lynn. I'm sorry*
***Chakra**: Take care of my records*

My stomach dropped.

"Something's wrong," I said.

Juliette didn't look up. Giovanni had started making sounds, low, animal sounds of distress. "Can it wait? We're kind of dealing with something here."

"It's Chakra," I said. My throat felt tight. "He's talking about leaving people behind. He's saying sorry. He's bringing up his records."

"He probably just needs space," Juliette said, still focused on Giovanni. "You know how he gets sometimes."

"This is different."

"Lynn." She finally looked at me. Her face was tired. "We have two people currently having bad reactions to sprayed weed. Can we handle one crisis at a time?"

Giovanni made a choking sound. Krzysztof had his head between his knees, breathing in controlled gasps.

I looked at my phone. At Chakra's messages. At the timestamps.

"Yeah," I said. "Okay."

I put my phone away.

The match ended. We'd been eliminated while we weren't watching. Game over.

Two hours later, Giovanni had stabilised into a heavy, paranoid quiet. Krzysztof's heart rate had returned to normal. They sat on opposite ends of the couch, exhausted, post-crisis hollow.

Juliette was cleaning up, empty bottles, abandoned controllers, the evidence of the night.

I pulled out my phone again.

No new messages from Chakra.

I tried calling. It rang. And rang. Voicemail.

"We should check on him," I said.

Juliette sighed. "Lynn, he's probably asleep. It's almost midnight."

"Something's wrong."

"You're anxious because of tonight. Everything feels wrong right now."

I wanted to argue. Wanted to say you don't know him like I do. But I just swallowed it. Too scared to push back. Trained to defer.

"Yeah," I said. "Maybe."

I texted him: **Are you okay?**

No response.

V

The next afternoon, I stood outside Chakra's door.

The summer heat pressed against my skin, thick and heavy. I banged until my knuckles stung. Until I couldn't feel the skin. Blisters forming. The only thing I could see was through the crack, soft jazz looping. The kind of music that gave a soul to an empty room. To fill the void with sounds. To make the silence bearable.

"Chakra," I yelled. "Open the fuck-up."

"Don't do any dumb shit over there."

Nothing.

For fuck's sake. I should've come sooner. I should've ignored Juliette. I should've trusted myself more. I should never doubt myself. I, fuck.

I called Bunga. She picked up immediately. I couldn't even form the sentence properly.

"I don't know what to do, Chakra was—"

"Call 112. Now," she cut in.

I turned my head. Juliette was behind me, face white. She'd come with me this time. Too late. But she'd come.

"Call 112," I told her.

I didn't look back at her.

The door gave way suddenly, like it had been waiting for me. The latch clicked, the frame shifted, and it opened in small increments. Just enough to let the truth leak through before it fully arrived.

All I could see was the floor, littered with torn foil and empty packaging, things that used to mean "pills" and now meant "too late." Old evidence. Not just tonight. Weeks of it, maybe. A room that had been preparing long before I got here.

"Chakra!" I shouted.

I shoved harder. The door hit something, a chair scraping. I stumbled forward from the force, almost went down. Juliette was still behind me. Frozen.

When I got my balance, the first thing I saw was Chakra's feet.

Hanging.

My mind tried to name what I was seeing and failed. The jazz kept looping, gentle and wrong, like the room hadn't gotten the news.

My brain tried to refuse it. Tried to label it as a scene from something else. A picture. A rehearsal.

Juliette stood in the doorway. She didn't make a sound. She just stared, face blank like it couldn't load the image. Her hands curled into fists, then opened again, like she couldn't decide what to do with them. Tears ran down her cheeks without any noise.

I tried to stand up, grabbed the chair. I knew it was pointless. It had happened last night. But I moved anyway, like denial could turn into CPR if I tried hard enough. I tried to hold his body with all the energy I had left. A body that didn't belong to anyone anymore. I knew it was pointless. I did it anyway.

Footsteps on the stairs. Not the paramedics.

His girlfriend.

She made a sound I'd never heard from a human mouth, something between a gasp and a broken animal sob. Like her lungs forgot the rules.

"We'd just gotten back together."

I could hear the cracks in her voice, the heaviness of the sounds.

I stared at him and something ugly rose up in me, hot and stupid and alive, the kind of anger that only shows up when grief has nowhere to go.

"Fuck, Chakra," I whispered. "It should've been me first."

My voice sounded wrong in that room.

"I nearly did it so many times, and you were always there before. Always shit-talking. Always pulling me back."

I swallowed, still holding his wrist like that could change physics.

"Fuck that bus driver thing you told me, if you're still not going to let me."

Then the paramedics arrived and the room filled with motion, fluorescent jackets, clipped voices, gloves snapping on. They moved fast, then slowed, then didn't move at all. Someone finally told me to let it go. It wouldn't change anything.

Slowly, I stepped down from the chair.

It was over.

Chakra was one of the first friends I'd made here. It was fall 2021. That exact Saturday. One of Sofie's friends' friends from Eindhoven came to Rotterdam. They organised a trip. We met at *Blaak*, and they planned to go to the *Markthal*, those orange cube-ish buildings. I didn't really care about it.

I overheard them talking about Eindhoven. How boring it was. How plain and bland. Most of them studied at Forty's. Sofie gave them a side-eye. Looked down on them.

While we split off for a moment, the Eindhoven crowd heading to the toilet, I asked Sofie.

"What's the thing with Fontys?"

"It's just for people that are not that smart," she said.

"There are two types of university here. Applied sciences and research. The one with ranking."

"Like us. We're the research one. The proper uni. That's what my brother said."

I didn't know stigmas like this existed. It didn't feel fair.

Then we joined back. Sofie merged into her friends. I was in the middle of both crowds, caught.

Then I saw someone as clueless as I was in the Eindhoven group.

While we walked through the *Markthal*, everyone split up to get food. I went for the cheapest thing, the kebab place. The clueless guy was standing in the queue next to me.

I tapped his shoulder.

"Hey."

"You're one of Adit's friends?"

"Yeah, you know him?"

"Not really. I'm Sofie's partner, if you know her."

"Oh, yeah actually. I met her in August with Adit and the others."

"You study at Fontys? What's with the stigma between research and—"

"Nah. Most of my friends studied there. I just spend time in Eindhoven sometimes."

We grabbed our orders. He suggested eating outside so he could smoke.

"Smoke?" he offered me one.

"Nah, I don't smoke."

"Rare."

"So, where do you actually study?"

"Maastricht. School of Business and Economics. Finance major."

"No fucking way. I'm in the Foundation Programme, but it starts next month. I'm still staying here while trying to find a place."

"Yeah, it's rough. I've been there. I was at TU Eindhoven before, Engineering, but dropped out first year. Then Maastricht."

We talked and talked. Bonded over finance. I used to trade full-time back home in Jakarta. He was just starting.

Then it came out of nowhere.

"Have you tried weed over here? Heard it was legal."

"Used to be daily. Now just weekly with friends and stuff."

"You never had it? Want to try it?"

"Is that even a question?"

"Come to Maastricht next Friday. That's where me and my friend usually do our weekly rituals after, I won't spoil it. Just want you to know you'll be in for a rough ride in the School of Business and Economics."

Fuck. I said it to myself. What shithole was I going to be dragged into.

"Problem-Based Learning," he said. "I won't spoil you further. Next Friday. Meet me at the station."

We exchanged contact.

"I'm Lynn, by the way."

"Cool. I'm Chakra. Jakarta?"

"Yup. Jakarta. South."

"I was North side. I can tell from your accent." He said it mockingly, like an inside joke from an old friend. Like reconnecting with someone you haven't seen in years.

For the first time in a week, I didn't feel like a ghost.

I arrived at Maastricht Station and texted Chakra.

"Oy. Lynn."

I waved. It was my first time in Maastricht. The city wasn't like Rotterdam, not the glossy, rebuilt kind. This was old. The buildings held their history like it meant something. Cobblestone roads. The kind of place that didn't demolish itself to stay relevant.

Chakra started walking, and I followed, mesmerised by the architecture despite myself.

"So," he said, "if we go straight beyond this, there's a really old ancient bridge. But the coffee shop—"

"Coffee shop? I thought we meant to buy weed," I cut in.

"What are you, a tourist?" He laughed. "It's a weed café. We'll go through the modern one. My go-to place."

I nodded and followed.

We arrived, and I saw another Indonesian waiting in the cold, wrapped in a scarf and jacket.

"Chakra," she shouted.

"You know her?" I asked.

"One of my first friends here in *Maasi*."

"One more thing," Chakra exhaled. "There's not many Indonesians here. So eventually," he said it sarcastically, "we end up knowing every Indonesian in the city. So you really should behave well."

He introduced me. "This is Lynn."

"Lynn?" she said. "I'm Bunga. Chakra just told me the other day he met some soon-to-be *Maasi*'s newest victim."

I got more scared.

"Chakra," Bunga said. "She hasn't got her identity card here. She can't go inside."

"What do you mean?" I asked, confused.

"Maastricht's a border," she said. "Tourists are forbidden in coffee shops."

Chakra sighed, the kind of sigh that meant he wanted to avoid trouble. "I'll just grab some. We can smoke here on the street."

He walked toward a boat. An actual floating boat in the water that sold weed.

Some time later, Bunga asked, "Are you sure, you want to try it?"

"Yeah. I've been meaning to for a long time."

"No pressure."

Bunga lit the blunt. Inhaled. Exhaled.

"First time, right?" Chakra said.

He showed me a tutorial. Reenacted it, exhaling, inhaling, showing his teeth, like you bite down hard and inhale at the same time.

Bunga looked at him weird.

"This is how you do it. Makes it hit better," he insisted.

I grabbed the blunt from Bunga and inhaled.

Fuck. It burned my throat, my lungs. I coughed like I was dying from lung cancer. I gasped for air.

Chakra offered me a bottle of water while hiding his laugh.

"Another victim," Bunga sighed. "Chakra, please."

It was the first time in a long time that I felt included.

After Rotterdam. After the emptiness. After watching someone I loved to choose her comfort first. After standing on a platform wondering if I should say goodbye. This felt different.

Juliette texted the next day.

***Juliette**: I'm so sorry*
***Juliette**: I should have listened to you*
***Juliette**: I keep thinking if we'd just gone right away*

I stared at the messages. She was right. She should have listened. But she'd been managing a crisis. She'd been doing triage. She'd made a rational decision with incomplete information.

And she'd been wrong.

I wanted to write back: You told me it could wait. You said I was just anxious because of Giovanni and Krzysztof. You were wrong and now he's dead.

Instead I wrote: "It's not your fault."

Because it wasn't. Not really. Chakra had made his choice before I got that text. Before Juliette said it could wait. Before any of us could've stopped it. But I couldn't forget that I'd known something was wrong. That I'd doubted myself because someone else seemed more certain. That I'd trained myself not to trust my perceptions.

The medication had taught me to see patterns.

Years of people telling me I was "too much" had taught me not to trust what I saw. So I could see clearly now. I just couldn't act on it.

Two weeks until exams. Fourteen days to memorise financial models and pretend I hadn't found my friend hanging in his apartment. The medication adjustment didn't help.

Or maybe it did. I could study now. I could focus. I just couldn't feel why any of it mattered.

The exam hall smelled like anxiety and disinfectant. Rows of identical desks stretched toward fluorescent lights, hundreds of students pretending we hadn't been crying in bathroom stalls two hours ago.

Two weeks ago, we finished the actual exams. This week's, was the resits. The second chance they gave if you failed. I already failed resits once in January.

The second half. Krzysztof and I repeated the same mistake. Same course. Same failure. Finance, and Quantitative Methods II. Again. We didn't learn a lesson since the first QM one.

Today, it was the Quantitative Methods II resits. The last one. The one that would decide if I passed.

I walked out next to Krzysztof, my backpack lighter than it had been in months. No more textbooks. No more all-nighters. Just the weight of not knowing if I'd passed, and not knowing if I cared.

"That was awful," Krzysztof sighed, pushing open the doors to summer air.

"As awful as the course coordinator"

I'd spent the entire exam staring at questions, thinking about how I used to cry over grades. Used to care if I passed. Used to feel something. Now: nothing.

The sun hit different in Maastricht after exams, sharper, more insistent, like it was demanding you celebrate. Students sprawled across the *Vrijthof*, drinking beer at eleven in the morning. Groups planned trips to Belgium, to Germany, to anywhere that wasn't here.

We walked to the bus stop. Nobody suggested staying for drinks. We all knew.

At *Stadspark*, Krzysztof lit a joint before we'd even reached our usual spot by the pond. I took a hit when it reached me. Held the smoke in my lungs. Waited to feel relief. Or dread. Or anything.

Nothing.

Just me and Krzysztof now, passing the joint back and forth in silence. He talked about summer plans. About going home to Poland. About his cousin's wedding. I nodded at appropriate intervals. Made sounds that indicated I was listening.

"Are you good?" he asked eventually.

"Yeah," I said. "Fine."

He didn't push. He'd learned not to. That's why he was the only one left.

"I just feel alienated. Lonely. It's just time passing. Or a bunch of shit that happened lately."

"It's normal. It's been rough months for us."

"Yeah. I feel like all of us are a bit distant. I miss the laughs. I haven't heard anything about Bunga either."

"I'd give her space. It's been a lot, honestly."

I didn't know, Krzysztof. Would it get better, though?

"Fingers crossed."

I lit another cigarette.

On the way home, Giovanni texted me asking if I'd already planned which exchange country I'd go to. Exchange was mandatory for business students, for our third year. I told him I hadn't decided yet. It was still next year. He insisted. He told me it was something to look forward to. Exciting, he said.

Later he sent me the website, the list of partnered universities.

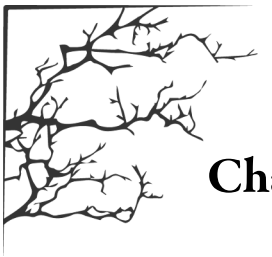
I scrolled down— Brisbane.

Queensland University of Technology

Maybe I'd do Brisbane. I was meant to go there if COVID hadn't happened.

July next year felt like a lifetime. Was it a sign? God knows.

Act II: Brisbane



Chapter 5: Summer 2023

I

White. Too white. Fluorescent white and someone's screaming in the next ward, someone screaming or is it the machine, the beeping beeping beeping—my arm.

Tape on the arm. Gauze. A line I don't remember getting. Bruise dark around the tape like skin dying, skin defending, skin failing, skin.

What happened.

The fluorescent hum. Low. Underneath. Always underneath. And a voice from the other side of the curtain, male, saying something about medication dosage, and someone crying, and then the beep-beep-beep again, and the hum, and underneath that, the way she looks at me. Her expression when I show her. The way her face changes. Disgust or is it fear or is it.

Footsteps. Vinyl squeak. Multiple people. A voice saying "psych observation" and another saying "room three" and then—a nurse. Older. Neutral face. Clipboard. Looking at the arm not at my face, looking at the arm and I see her thinking something, I see the calculation happening in her eyes, am I dangerous, is this accidental.

"Can you tell me your name?"

Ash. Ashlynn. Ashlynn Widjaja. And the fluorescent hum and someone else screaming far away or maybe not far, perhaps close, the walls are thin, the walls are too thin and I hear breathing that isn't mine, can I breathe, can I—

"Do you know where you are?"

Hospital. Yes hospital. I know hospital. I call, I call the crisis line and they say ambulance and I say no and they say we have to and I can't stop them and now I'm here and my arm is taped.

"Do you remember why you're here?"

The self-harm. Say it. Say the word self-harm and she writes it down and it becomes official and then I'm the kind of person who does that, I'm the kind of person who. I'm the—

I called, I say. I just. The crisis line. They made me come here and I.

She doesn't look up from the clipboard. Pen clicking. Click click click. The rhythm underneath the hum. Click click under the hum under the distant screaming.

"I need to ask you some questions."

And the questions come rapid-fire like a punch combination like she's checking boxes not asking a person and I watch her face while I answer, watching for the moment she decides I'm dangerous, watching for the micro-expression that means involuntary hold, watching for the split second where I become not-a-person-anymore, I'm just a—

"Have you had thoughts of harming yourself?"

Yes

"Thoughts about killing yourself?"

Yes

And the hum and the beeping from the other curtain and someone saying "get the doctor!" and footsteps running and my chest is tight and her eyes narrow when I say yes, do I say that right, should I say that differently—

"Do you have a plan?"

No

"Any intent to act right now?"

No

And this is the one that matters because if I say yes she keeps me here and if I say no I'm lying and lying is worse than yes because the lie is a choice and the yes is just. Happening. To me. Always happening to me things just happen and I can't stop them, I can't—

"Any previous attempts?"

I give her dates and she writes them down and the dates blur because time isn't linear, it's all happening now, it's all happening forever, it's all happening and I watch her face watching for judgment and the nurse's expression is blank but that's worse, that's worse because blank means she's deciding something behind the blankness and I can't read blank.

"Any alcohol or drug use?"

No

And the fluorescent hum and the screaming stops or maybe I stop hearing it or maybe it gets louder and I can't tell anymore and my thoughts loop my thoughts are—Ash calm down Ash breathe Ash you're fine—not my voice, not my voice, it's not coming from inside my head, it's coming from—The clipboard. Pen. Fast. Weightless. Clicking.

"Do you feel like you can keep yourself safe right now?"

This is the one. This is the cage. If I say yes I'm lying and she knows I'm lying and lying means I'm manipulative means I'm dangerous means they keep me. If I say no I admit I'm not safe and they keep me.

So I'm trapped. Trapped trapped trapped.

Her eyes wait. The pupils dilated or constricted I can't tell, I can't focus on her pupils because there's the fluorescent white and the hum and the beeping and the screaming and the hum and she's waiting and I need to answer and I need to say something that keeps me not-trapped and—

Yes, I say. "I can. Keep myself safe.

And she writes it down and I lie and she knows but she writes it down anyway because form form form everything goes in the form and the form means I can leave and the form means the paperwork is done and the form—

"Do you live with anyone?"

Yes. But she won't pick me up. She sees me and sees the arm and sees what I did and sees what I am.

"Is there someone who can pick you up?"

No. I mean. Maybe. I don't. Someone can. I say

And the hum and her eyes and the form and the click-click-click of the pen and someone in the other section asking "where's the medications cart" and someone else saying "they're coming" and I hear the metal rattle of the cart coming down the hallway and my arm stings under the tape and I feel the pulse of the IV line and there's nothing I can do nothing nothing nothing—

"Someone will speak to you today," she says. "Try to rest."

And she pulls the curtain and the screaming gets louder or maybe she just lets it through when she opens it and there's the hum and the beep-beep-beep and underneath that a man coughing and a woman saying "I won't take it" and a voice responding "you don't have a choice" and my thoughts loop—they know they know they know you lied they know—and I still see her face in the negative space behind my eyes, the way she looks at my arm, the way her expression shifts, was it disgust, was it fear, was it— Hours. Maybe minutes. Time is.

The fluorescent doesn't change. The hum doesn't change. The beeping doesn't stop.

A psychiatrist comes. He sits. Heavy. His eyes on my arm not my face and I watch his micro-expressions watching the calculation happening and he's writing and I can't read what he's writing but it's about me, it's about whether I'm dangerous, it's about.

"Are you on anything at the moment?"

No.

"Have you been on antidepressants before?"

No.

And he nods like it's not new like he's seen a thousand people like me with a thousand self-harm scars and a thousand medication stops and I'm not unique I'm not interesting I'm just a checkbox and the fluorescent and the hum and he already writes the prescription before I even answer because he knows what he prescribes because I'm the pattern and the pattern gets sertraline.

"We can start sertraline. Low dose. Your GP can follow up."

And he stands and the script is in my hand and I'm supposed to take it and I'm supposed to say thank you and I'm supposed to be grateful for the chemicals that make me flat and make me numb and make me not-myself and he's already moving toward the next curtain the next number the next pattern and—

The beeping. Constant. Underneath. The hum. Constant. Underneath.

The screaming in the psych ward is closer now or maybe I'm getting used to it or maybe there are more people now and the fluorescent is so white it's almost sound, the whiteness is a frequency and it vibrates inside my skull and my thoughts race and loop—keep yourself safe keep yourself safe keep yourself safe—and that's a lie that's a lie that's a lie and everyone knows it's a lie and I lie to her face and she writes it down and now I'm stuck in the system because of the lie and I can't get out and I can't.

A different nurse. Older. Softer voice.

"Just sign here, and here."

And I sign and my hand shakes and the shaking is visible and everyone sees I'm shaking and that means I'm not safe, that means I lie and she sees it and she writes it down.

"You're all set. Take care of yourself."

And I pull on my clothes and the arm stings and the papers list charges and I can't read the amounts because the numbers blur and there's too much text and my eyes jump and I see every detail of every person who walks past and I catalogue their expressions, are they looking at me, do they know, do they see what I did, do.

Hallway. Fluorescent all the way. The hum follows. The beeping is distant now or maybe I'm getting used to it or maybe I'm just numb and the numbness spreads and the numb is like the medication already working or maybe the numbness is what happens when you realise you're trapped in the system and— Automatic doors open.

Brisbane air. Hot. Humid. And the sounds are different now, the hospital hum is gone but there's traffic and wind and the magpie carolling and the construction drill from somewhere and Ailidh's voice in my head saying you need to call me and my mother's voice saying we're disappointed and the nurse's voice saying try to rest and the psychiatrist's voice saying sertraline and they're all underneath everything now, they're underneath the Brisbane air.

My hand holds the script.

The other holds the papers.

A bin a few meters away.

The script goes in and it's the only choice I make all day and it's the only thing that feels like mine and I drop it and the metal lid closes and it's gone and I'm still here.

Outside. Brisbane. Alone. No medication. No mediation.

Just the sound and the loop and the arm and the knowledge that I lie and the system has me and the system keeps me.

Black hair, blonde roots showing. Septum piercing. Tattoos scattered arm to wrist to knuckle. Dark around the eyes, pale underneath. Water hits the pylons underneath the bridge, slap slap slap, and her mouth moves.

Blunt from her pocket like she's been holding it or not.

"I never truly understand," she says. "The courage to end it."

Lighter click. Gas hiss. Flame catches the tip and the orange crawls and the river behind her moves left to right or right to left depending on which side you stand on and Chakra stands on the other side once, stands on the other side always standing on the other—

"What do you mean, courage? I ask, curiously."

"Like. You decide. That's it. Done. How do you just decide?"

Smoke toward water. Maastricht smoke. Chakra smoke. Same smoke. Same river. Different country. Same slap underneath. And friends cut off or left or both, now it's just the sound of it, the water, the cars on the bridge above humming tires on wet road and her mouth.

"It's not courage. High-risk means faster. Month normally but two weeks if you try hard enough."

"What waiting list?"

"Crisis care. Priority. They move you up."

Sound like choking. Or laughing. Or both. Her throat. The piercing catches streetlight orange then gone orange.

"You try to kill yourself to get a faster therapy appointment?"

"It works."

"That's insane."

"Yeah."

Blunt passes. I haven't smoked in months. First drag and the water blurs her face, blurs the bridge lamp purple, fake, too bright too bright and Sofie's kitchen light is that colour once, no it isn't, it's white, it's always white, why does everything turn purple near water—ash on her fingers.

The way the ember eats paper. The sound of it. Tiny crackle you shouldn't be able to hear but I hear everything, I hear the water and the cars and the crackle and her breathing and a bird somewhere and the bridge groans under weight of something crossing.

"Two weeks ago you say a month."

"It was."

"So you try to die to skip the queue."

River moves. Light on it moves. Her phone screen lights her chin blue-white and Chakra's chin in the coffee boat lamplight and he looks at me, looks at me like he already knows what I'm going to do before I do it and the phone buzzes buzzes on the concrete between us.

"You should try a dating app."

"What."

"Exposure. Hinge Tinder whatever. You're scared of people leaving. Dating apps just disposable. Swipe they disappear. You get used to it."

Her phone buzzes. Another notification. The screen lights her jaw her neck the tattoo on her collarbone, some word I can't read from here. She doesn't look at it. Keeps smoking. The smoke curls up past her ear past the piercing past the roots growing out blonde against black.

Another buzz. Another. Stacking. Vibration against concrete you can hear it between words between breaths.

Chakra looks at me like he tells me the future, he already sees me living it and the river is the same, the smoke is the same, and I sit in it again, sitting in it.

That's stupid.

"Why?"

"It's the same thing. Slower doesn't mean better."

"Maybe it does. Maybe slow is the point."

Water. Water. Not looking at water, looking at water and the pylons underneath and her legs stretched out taking up the whole bench, her boots heavy on the concrete and the blunt between her fingers and the ash falls and the sound of the ash hitting ground is quieter than anything should be but it's still there, still there, still.

"I can't be alone." Her voice changes. Lower.

"I know what's wrong. Since I was fifteen. BPD. Abandonment. Emotional dysregulation. Medication would help but medication makes me not-me and I hate myself enough so no medication. So I cycle."

"Cycle how?"

"Psych ward out pills different pills new therapist same problem. Dublin I do therapy months then I move, can't be fucked starting over, someone new, what's the point, they say the same thing anyway."

Second blunt. Her pockets. Magic pockets, infinite blunts, and the lighter clicks again and the hiss again and flame again and—

"Broke up last week. Tall guy psycho tradie. Can't be alone already thinking next person."

"You seem fine."

"That's because you're here. You're leaving soon or I'm leaving, someone's leaving, already making plan for next."

The word is loud and the river is loud and the bridge is loud and a car horn somewhere far or close, I can't tell anymore, can't tell distance when everything arrives at the same volume, Chakra's voice and Ailidh's voice and the water.

Take a break from dating.

"Could but won't. Being alone worse than being with someone shit. Before you say dramatic I know it's dramatic don't care."

She lights the second blunt. Her hands steady. Mine not. The shaking you see if you look, which I can't stop doing, looking at my hands looking at hers, looking at the difference, steady unsteady steady unsteady, the ember the ash the smoke—

Phone buzzes again. And again. Screen lights up her face from below like horror movie lighting and her mouth talks about the cycle and the notifications stack while she talks about it, living it right now, the cycle, the phone, the next person, the next person—the Hinge and Ella's face.

Disposable and Ella's face. Swipe and Ella's voice saying you're too much you're always too much and Chakra sees it already. Hinge and cutting off and trying to die and asking for crisis and the queue and the diagnosis and the medication and the name change and the city change and it loops it loops it—Hinge and Ella and Chakra and the river and the smoke and the phone buzzing and Ailidh's mouth moving and the water slapping pylons and the bridge groaning and the cars and the ash falling and the ember crackling and none of it stops none of it stops none of it.

Blunt passes back. Head spins. The way she sits. Legs out. Boots heavy. Piercings catch light lose light catch. Hands on the second blunt like this is just what you do. Sit by a river. Smoke. Everything arrives all at once, the light the sound the smell the smoke the water—the both sitting.

Both smoking. River cuts the city the way rivers do, the way everything cuts, the way everyone leaves or you leave or someone's leaving and the sound of the water doesn't stop and the phone doesn't stop and—

Smoke. Watch the river. The pylons.

The light. The sound of everything at the same volume.

Wait.

II

Air-conditioner breeze. Cold. Pen click. Clock tick-tick-tick-tick.

The wall is white but bone-coloured, old Queenslander, cold, and the air-con breeze goes through me and she looks at me with the eyes like exactly how my mom looks at me when I'm five and I break her vase and I can't stop thinking about that moment, her face, her disappointment, her eyes, and now this woman's eyes have the same calculation, the same judgment, the same—

"Today is our final session."

Final. The word sits there and my thoughts spiral—Final means over means done means I have to know now have to know if I've been on limbo all these years, Maastricht Netherlands emotions stuff disorder, is it true is it false, please say it say it says.

"We'll review the assessment outcome and go through next steps."

And the clock ticks and the pen clicks and I hear both sounds simultaneously and they layer but my mind races ahead, drowning them out, drowning out her voice—BPD because attempt and died again and again, that's what they say, that's what the emergency room says, that's what Ella says, that's what my mother says, that's what—

"This follows the crisis referral from Princess Alexandra."

I nod. My hand shakes. She doesn't look at my hand. She looks at her notes.

"Okay," I say. I want to ask back what happened, is it true, I've been on limbo all my years, Maastricht Netherlands emotions stuff—disorder, is it true is it false, please say, say, say it—and the words come out wrong, come out scattered, and I watch her face watching for the micro-expression that means she thinks I'm insane, watching for the moment she decides I'm not worth the diagnosis.

"Looking at your history. The interviews. The scales we did. It fits. ADHD."

ADHD. Not BPD. Not the thing the emergency room screams at me. Not the thing that makes me dangerous. Not the thing that makes me the problem. And my thoughts loop so loud I barely hear her voice, it's just noise, it's just background—

So that's it? No BPD? But they say BPD because of my attempt because attempts mean personality disorder means I'm broken broken broken like that like the thing my psychologist tells me when I'm fifteen, if everyone does this to you maybe you're the problem not them, and now she says ADHD, not broken, not personality disorder, just attention, which is just, which is just—

"So that's it? No BPD? Emergency always says BPD because of my attempt."

She explains something about suicide attempts and diagnosis and I hear the words but I don't hear them, the air-con hum and the clock and the pen are louder than her voice.

"That's... that's important. An attempt alone isn't diagnostic. We looked for BPD markers. The instability. Relationship patterns. Abandonment sensitivity."

Chronic abandonment sensitivity. I don't want to hear it again. That's me. That's the journal entry, I am afraid again to try to get know someone better, and everyone keeps leaving me, and the way Ella leaves and the way Sofie leaves and the way my parents look at me like I'm broken like I'm the problem and the way Ailidh—

God, I think I am. I think I am.

I'm insane then. The thought is not normal, no normal people go through this loop, and that's the description of Ailidh. BPD and ASD, a label we both get labeled by the systems, and I spiral because she gets the same diagnoses and we're both broken in the same way and that means.

So I'm not broken, I just don't pay attention, I just don't manage working memory, I just don't regulate tasks, I just don't—

But that's everything. That's why I lose the money. That's why I drop out. That's why I leave Ella. That's why I can't keep a friend. That's why I can't keep myself safe. That's why that's why that's why.

"What exactly does ADHD mean here?"

And I hear my voice asking and it sounds small and far away and she answers but the loop is louder, the loop is always louder—

"Executive functioning. Task initiation. Time perception. Working memory. It was consistent. Across your education. Work history."

Task initiation, I can't start, I can't begin, I can't move. Time perception, time is wrong for me, always moving wrong, rushing

or stopped or—Working memory, I forget what I'm saying mid-sentence, I forget the words, I forget the point, I forget—

"Emotions too?"

And I'm angry now and I want to rage and I want to—No. No. Fuck. I want to be angry. Now what, the label, I should just—But she keeps talking and I can't hear her, I can't track her words because my own mind screams.

"Emotions can be affected. Impulse thresholds. Attention fatigue. Overload. It's not... it's not a personality mechanism."

Not a disorder. Not broken. Just tired. Just overloaded. Just overstimulated and—

And the air-con and the clock and the pen and her face and the white wall.

"Next steps?"

She tells me about psychiatrists and GPs and referrals and I try to follow but my thoughts race ahead—what if the psychiatrist disagrees, what if this is wrong, what if I'm still just broken and this is just another label, another system, another way to manage me, another way to keep me controlled, another way to—

"Medication's outside my scope. I've prepared documentation. Psychiatrists in Brisbane. Take this to your GP. I'll give you the summary."

Medication. The word sits heavy. Sertraline that I throw away. *Vyvanse* that makes me aggressive. *Dexamphetamine* that makes me feel alive and then makes me overdose and then makes me end up here.

"Before we finish. There's another outcome. Extended evaluation."

Additional. Another diagnosis. Another way I'm different, another way I'm wrong, another way I'm—

"Okay."

"Based on the indicators. Sensory profile. Social-communication patterns. You also meet criteria. For Autism Spectrum Condition."

Autism.

And the word hangs there and my thoughts fracture—

But I do. I did. I always do. And no one tells me, no one says anything, and all these years I try to be normal, try to socialise, try to make friends, and the answer is I'm autistic the whole time and that's why I can't read people, that's why I can't understand social cues, that's why I can't, that's why I can't, that's why I couldn't, that's why.

"Autism can't be cured."

And I hear my own voice saying it and she explains overlap and masking and verbal adults.

"It's not uncommon. ADHD can mask it. In verbal adults. The sensory processing. Predictability reliance. Conversation processing."

Sensory processing, the air-con is too cold and the pen clicking is too loud and the clock is too present and everything is too much and her voice is just another sound in the assault. I don't want to hear it again.

Predictability reliance, I need routine, I need structure, I need to know what's happening and when, and Maastricht is predictable and when it isn't I break and when Ella leaves the predictability breaks.

Conversational processing differences, I can't read tone, I can't understand subtext, I hear words but not the meaning underneath and that's why people ghost me, that's why people leave me, that's why I never understand what people actually mean, that's why.

"What does that change?"

"Intervention shifts. Environment fit. Sensory pacing. Communication clarity. Cognitive load."

Environment fit. I don't fit anywhere. Maastricht doesn't fit. Brisbane doesn't fit. Jakarta doesn't fit. Nowhere fits. And that's

because I'm autistic and ADHD and I force myself into spaces that aren't built for me and the person who fits is Ailidh and she's also autistic and also ADHD and we both don't fit and we find each other in the not-fitting. And I say this and I don't know why I say it but the words come.

"They told me I was cured when I was six."

"It's neurodevelopment. Lifelong. Support helps. But it doesn't resolve."

Not cured. Not resolved. Just always there.

And the medication won't fix it because it's not broken, it's just different, and all these years trying to be normal, trying to be fixed, trying to be less, trying to be smaller, trying to be less autistic, less ADHD, less myself, and the answer is there is no cure. There's just me.

"So both diagnoses stand?"

"Yes. Comorbidity is common. Each explains different things. The documentation reflects both."

Two diagnoses. Two ways of being different. Two reasons I can't function in the system. Two reasons I'm broken not broken not broken just—

The air-con breeze. Cold. The clock ticking. The pen clicking. The wall white and bone-coloured. Her eyes like my mother's eyes like every adult's eyes who ever looks at me and decides I'm wrong, decides I'm broken, decides I need to be fixed.

"I'll give you the report. The list. A template for your GP."

Documents. Papers. Proof that I'm ADHD. Proof that I'm autistic. Proof that I have a reason for all of this.

But I don't want proof. I want to know how to exist. I want to know how to not destroy every relationship. I want to know how to not end up in the hospital. I want to know—

"Before closing. Any remaining questions?"

And the silence waits and my thoughts race and—what do I ask, do I ask if the medication works, do I ask if I ever keep someone, do I ask if this is why Sofie leaves, do I ask if this is why Ella can't handle me, do I ask if I keep trying to kill myself, do I ask when it gets better, do I ask if it ever gets better.

"So," I say. "Another waiting time. Again?"

"Yes."

And she hands me the papers and the recommendations and the letter and I take them and my hand is steady now or maybe it isn't and I can't tell anymore and— Outside the office, the Brisbane air is humid and heavy and I hold documents that say I'm ADHD and autistic and I'm supposed to feel something like relief or validation or finally-an-answer but instead I feel empty.

Two diagnoses. Two explanations. Two reasons for everything that goes wrong.

But no reason for how to live with it.

No reason for how to exist.

Just the label and the documents and the knowledge that I'm not broken not broken not broken, just different, and different is just another way of being alone.

I want to stop. Just stop. Not sleep, not rest—stop. No next thing. No waiting. No another diagnosis. No another medication. No another version of myself trying to be something the system wants.

But then I'm still here. Still breathing. Still taking the papers.

And that's not because I choose to accept. It's just what's happening.

So I accept by default. By accident. Because I can't seem to actually exit.

III

Dry summer heat stabs into my skin like how I used to do in high school when I look at myself.

Ella is still in gym clothes. She fits me into the least busy schedule she has. Her eyes, her eyes are different, she looks at me like I'm a demon. Mentally ill, she says, still echoes in my mind, maybe I am, and selfish I am. Again and again. I cry and I try to hold my scream and I try not to.

I just cry, say nothing, look into her eyes and it makes me remember the first time I meet her at the university's club where I try to say hi because she looks cool. Then the party then date then move in then all of my cue reads and mask not enough and—Aircon hum. Low drone fills the room like the room has a pulse. Next to me a girl and a house I don't recognise. She snores like how I snore when I'm with Ella.

She sleeps on me. Her arm across my ribs. Weight of it. Her hair smells like coconut or shampoo or someone else's bathroom. The ceiling fan clicks every third rotation, click click skip, click click skip, and I don't know what happens last night.

I pull up my phone. Screen too bright, white burns into the dark and it is still March 2024.

Heart won't slow. Ribcage. Her arm still on me, still the weight of it. Slowly. Don't wake her. Slide out. Feet on tile, cold cold tile, and the fridge hum from the kitchen joins the aircon drone, two notes slightly off from each other and—

Bathroom. I sit on the floor. Tile cold under my legs. Tap drips slow. Drip. Drip. A car outside distant. A dog barks two streets over or three. My own breathing is too loud in the small room and the light flickers, just white and warm white and warm.

Ella's eyes again. Gym clothes. Demon. My face in the mirror across from me and my face in Ella's kitchen and Ella's face looking at my face and her mouth saying mentally ill and the tap dripping and the fan clicking from the bedroom, click click skip—I cry.

Quiet. Hands on the tile, the grout lines under my fingers, dirty or just dark, can't tell in this light. Crying and the dog barking and

the fridge humming and the tap and my breathing and all of it the same volume, all of it—

Phone screen lights up. Hinge. Notification. Bishop.

The brightness cuts the dark, cuts my eyes, and Ailidh's voice from weeks ago sits by the river, blunt smoke.

"Got a match on Hinge. Bishop."

"What's he like?"

"Don't know yet. Should I text?"

"Yeah. But when you go out—take him to the cemetery."

Tap dripping. The girl shifts in the bed. Mattress creaks through the wall.

"For a date?"

"Second date. You gotta know if he's real first. Then cemetery."

"Why the cemetery?"

Her eyes are mockingly happy like she instantly knows it's jokes probably a middle finger soon.

"Because if he can't handle that he's not worth it."

"That's fucked up."

Bus hum and tap drip and Ella's mouth saying selfish and the phone screen dims then lights up again, another notification.

"To be cringe is to be free."

Ella's eyes. Bishop's name on my phone screen. The girl's breathing through the wall, steady steady steady, and mine not steady.

Tap. Drip. Phone dims. Bishop waits. The message sits there, letters on glass, male and female, male and female, should I or should I not, and Ella's voice again, mentally ill, and the fan clicking and the girl breathing and Bishop's name and Ailidh's voice, to be cringe is to be free, and should I text back or not or should I but— I sit on the tile. The grout under my fingers. The fridge. The tap. The dog. The fan. The girl breathing through the wall and Bishop waiting on a screen going dark.

I don't text anyone back.
I sit.

***Ashlynn**: do you want to grab a coffee sometimes at west end ahah*

The ahah. Always covering. Always the ahah like it makes asking not asking. Three days after the bathroom floor. I don't know why. Ailidh's voice or the silence or the girl whose name I still don't know, whose coconut shampoo is still on the pillow I throw out.

He says yes. Three minutes. Doesn't even leave me on the read long enough to panic. Just yes.

Then not coffee. Bar. His idea. Friday night.

Friday night again, West End again, The Burrow's yellow mouth spills onto Russell Street, my phone lights up like it's trying to brand my palm, notifications stack, faces crop too close, dates, new people, and the certainty arrives before anything else, they leave, I am alone, I am already alone, cigarette between my fingers, ash too long, ember pulsing, and I watch the ash like it is a countdown.

Everything is visible at once, no hierarchy, no mercy, the chalkboard menu inside with smudged letters, condensation on pint glasses, the shine of the tap handles, a girl's hoop earring catching light in a clean arc, the way her eyes flick left when she laughs, the storm cloud bruise above Boundary Street, the wet sheen on the footpath, gum stains ground into concrete like fossils, the exact seam line on Bishop's jacket before Bishop is even Bishop, just motion approaching, just shape resolving.

Footsteps, and my attention snaps to them, even though I don't choose it. He appears in pieces, white, Asian, 5'9, wolf cut, fringe heavier on one side, zipper straight, hands hovering near pockets like he's waiting for a cue. His eyes go to cigarette, phone, mouth, then finally my eyes, assembling me like a checklist.

His Hinge profile has three mentions of film. Three. I count. I know he likes Title Fight because his prompt answer says so. I know I like Title Fight. I know I can say the word Title Fight right now and something opens between us and I see the path, the exact conversational turn.

"Ashlynn?"

The way he says it is careful, like he touches a hot surface. His pupils catch two reflections at once, streetlight and doorway glow, crescents nested inside black, and I can't stop tracking it.

"Finally we meet," I say too fast, too bright, watching my own smile happen like it is a separate person. "Took us nearly two weeks to plan this up."

He laughs, and I see the laugh before I hear it, shoulders dropping a centimetre, relief visible. My cigarette smoke curls sideways because someone pushes the door open, warm air spills, and the smoke breaks apart, ribbon to fragments.

"Moved here around early December," I say, because that is my opener, my timeline placed on the table like an ID. "You?"

"Ten years ago," he says immediately, filling the gap before it becomes a gap. "Did my school here."

His voice has this thing. A slight drag on certain words. Not slow. Deliberate. A pause before honest parts like he edits in real time and I hear the edit, hear the gap between what he is going to say and what he chooses instead. I can talk about film. I can talk about film right now. The bridge is right there. My mouth won't take it.

His gaze flicks past me for half a second, scanning the crowd, then returns, micro-check, privacy check, is this safe.

"Where are you actually from?" The word actually is a pin, I see it land, his jaw tightens for a blink, then smooths.

"Canberra," he says quick, eyes flick away then back, checking if Canberra disappoints me, checking if he has to justify it.

"I'm complicated," I say, because that sentence is a reflex, because it buys time, because it stops the world from flattening me.

"Jakarta, Maastricht, and here."

The word Maastricht drags in behind it, not invited, Chakra, the blunt smell, oh god, you are already dead, the thought flashes like a subtitle, and my face stays still because faces are work and I can't afford a leak. His eyebrows lift, a microsecond of interest, and it is so clean I feel exposed.

"I've only made one friend here," I say, and the moment the sentence leaves my mouth it feels wrong, too early, too honest, but it's already in the air, and air doesn't return things.

He nods once, slow, matching weight, not pity, just acknowledgement. His lower lip presses in for a second, then releases.

"I'm alone too now," he says, and his mouth tightens at the corners like the words scrape on the way out.

Sound keeps arriving, laughter from inside, a bottle clink, a bus rumble somewhere down Melbourne Street, but it doesn't organise anything, it is just another layer. The visuals are the real assault, the way his eyes keep flicking to my hands, cigarette ash length, then my face, then my mouth, calibrating.

We text for a month. Not intense. Not the kind of texting where you perform interest and investment. Just background. Family. Where you grow up. Surface things that sound like depth if you say them with enough pauses. Never about film. Never about the thing his profile says three times and my whole life says and both of us carry it and neither of us bridges it and I see the bridge, I see it right there.

"You say everyone here just hangs out with their friends from high school and you—" I start, and the sentence gets cut by a burst of laughter from the doorway.

"Friend group meltdown," he says, "Starting from zero again, hey," and the hey is gentle, a soft landing, his voice trying not to step on mine.

"Yeah," I say, and I feel my own lie-speed, too quick. "I don't mind. Not just meltdown, it is just—"

The sentence collapses. Not into labels, just images arriving too fast and all at the same brightness, Ailidh at the back, weed smell in hair, Chakra's name, messages, glances, pupils too wide, hands shaking, the exact curve of someone's smile right before it turns, and none of it sorts into a story. Action required, pick one detail, explain, but my body doesn't move, my mouth can't choose, and the gap between knowing and doing is physical.

"We all just grow apart," he offers, safe sentence, rope thrown across messy water.

I nod because nodding is easy, nodding is movement without consequence.

"I don't really know much about Brisbane," I say, then I hear myself slap on the shield, "Socially isolated, lol," as if lol turns loneliness into a joke. My smile arrives late. I see it arrive late. I can't fix the timing.

"Next time I'll make an itinerary list," he says, and I watch the effect, planning straightens him, structure gives him edges, his posture lifts like he holds something solid.

The words next time sit in the air. He says next time. Already planning forward. The way Ella never plans forward, the way Ella keeps me in the present tense like the future is a room I'm not invited to, and his mouth says next time like it is nothing, like people just say that, like—

Music.

I can say music now. I can say hey you mention *Title Fight* on your profile. I can say I listen to *Floral Green* seventeen times a day then we fuck. I can say anything. The path maps out, every turn

visible, every possible response calculated, and my hands pull at the hem of my shirt and my mouth says nothing about music. Nothing.

A month of texting and a whole date and the thing we actually share sits between us untouched because the mechanism that bridges knowing to saying is broken, is gone, is—and my hands pull at the hem of my shirt and his hands hold his glass and the scar on the left knuckle is faded white and I know the scar and I know the Title Fight and I know everything and my mouth says nothing.

Later, South Brisbane bus station, timetable screens too bright, buses hissing, doors opening and closing with that soft hydraulic sigh, announcements clipped and distant. The floor speckles crawl in my vision, reflections in glass break people into fragments, my own face appears in a panel then disappears as I shift half a step. The river is near, not visible, but the air has that damp undertone, and traffic over the bridge is a constant low wave.

Bishop's eyes flick to departures, then to my face, then to my mouth, reading for cues, and I read him back, blink rate, shoulder tension, the way he keeps his hands visible now, less hovering, more decided. He tries. I see the trying.

Before Ella. Before everything. A first date means the script runs automatically. The reaching. The accidental touch. The performance of closeness. I hold hands first date. I do it because the mask knows when to lean, when to touch, when to let silence become invitation. His hand is right there. The gap between our hands. I see the distance. I measure it.

I can't cross it.

The thing after Ella. After the breakup. After processing. More cautious. More scared. I need to know someone well before I can even—last time I try with someone new I can't get hard, can't even—and the body remembers what the brain tries to move past and his hand is right there, fifteen centimetres, and the body says no and the brain sees yes and—

"I hope you make friends here," he says, and he holds hope carefully, like it breaks if touched wrong, and my chest does something unnamed, just a snag in rhythm.

"So, see you again later?" I ask, and I watch the question hover between us.

I hug him. My arms move like they follow a script I see written above his shoulder. He hesitates half a beat, then returns it, careful hands, light pressure, and I register every contact point, jacket fabric texture, warmth through layers, the exact placement of his fingers, the slight shift of his weight as he commits to the hug.

"It was really nice to meet you," he says, clean and unprompted, into the space near my ear.

What.

I never receive that before.

His voice stays in my head on the bus, every detail, the wolf cut, the fringe, the left-side smile, the pupils with two crescents, the scar I don't ask about, and the pause before honest parts, and all of it so loud, so clear, and completely useless, and I know he likes Title Fight and I say nothing and I see every path and I take none and the bus hisses and the seats vibrate and his voice says it was really nice to meet you and the words play again and again and again—

I should hold his hand. I should. And I don't. I just regret in the loop.

Again.

Seeing everything. Doing nothing. Again.

IV

Feet hanging. Just feet. Sock still on the left one and the right one bare and the body is not a body anymore, just weight pulling down, and I look up and I shouldn't look up but I always look, I can never stop looking and—

But before that. Before that we are three. Eating ice cream. Summer. The Netherlands summer, dry and hot, not like Brisbane

hot, different hot, and the ice cream melts faster than we eat it and Chakra laughs at something stupid Krzysztof says and the vanilla runs down his wrist and he licks it off and Juliette is there too, we just sit, just sit, and the sun and the ice cream and the laughing and nonsense, just nonsense and—

Now just hanging. Hanging and hanging and Juliette behind me, her face doing something I've never seen a face do before, like her whole body refuses what her eyes send, and the ice cream melts, the ice cream is always melting, the summer is hot and his body is cold and the socks one on one off and—

I wake up.

Full in sweat. Next to no one.

It isn't Maastricht anymore. Night. Quiet. Brisbane quiet, not like any quiet I've known before. Quiet like silence, like I don't talk to anyone in a month because everyone leaves and leaves and the room is dark and the ceiling fan doesn't move because I forget to turn it on and the sweat cools on my neck on my chest and the sheet sticks to my legs.

I can't recognise the cues anymore. I can't read faces. I can't do the thing where you make someone like you by being the version of you they need. The mask machinery rusts or is gone or medication breaks it or the breakup breaks it or Chakra breaks it by dying and leaving me with a face I can't unknown, a body I can't unseen, feet I can't.

My head is all over, all over, stop stop stop and stop, and the clock on the wall ticks in the dark, tick tick tick, and it is midnight and the meds, where, bedside drawer, I take the pills, I take the *dex* at 2 am, middle of the night, supposed to be fifteen minutes until it hits but when, when, the ceiling still doesn't move and the sweat still cools and the ticking and—

I'm alone. I'm scared. But I can't make new friends because it makes me remember the argument, Ella's voice, mentally ill, selfish,

and a new friend, what if they don't like me, I can't read them anymore, I can't tell if their smile is real or the kind of smile that turns and everyone leaves and leaves or hangs when they want to stay with me, god says otherwise, god always says otherwise.

Stop, stop, stop, stop. This fucking fuck my head, and I miss my meds, the timing is off, the *dex* doesn't hit yet, and the room is dark and the wardrobe, smooth brown wood, I see it from the bed, the handle, the grain. I get up and I go inside. I sit in the dark of it. Clothes hang above me, hangers press into my shoulders, and the smell of fabric softener. The dark is smaller in here, contained, and god please stop this, stop—

Knife. Kitchen. The knife is sharper. Good for the real deal, like when I watch that show when I am a teen, the Netflix one that gives me a tutorial for the first time, like, oh, so that's how, and I am fifteen, and I learn it from a screen, and the wardrobe, dark, and the knife in the kitchen, and the kitchen is three steps from here.

Bird.

The fucking bird. Brisbane bird squeaks outside the window like it doesn't know what time it is, like it doesn't care, like the whole world keeps moving while I am inside a wardrobe at 3 am and the bird just screams, just screams—

Light. Morning happens. I don't know when the wardrobe becomes the bed again. I don't know when I sleep. The bird still goes. Another one answers. Two birds scream at each other across the street and the heat already starts and semester ends soon and there is an exam and the light through the blinds stripes the wall and—

Someone clears his throat.

"Ashlynn."

Office. Chair. I'm sitting. When do I get here. The walls are beige or cream or whatever colour waiting rooms are when they try not to be a colour. His desk. Papers. A screen turned slightly away from me.

His glasses catch the overhead light, two white rectangles where his eyes should be.

"I just receive the diagnosis report from the psychologist."

His voice is flat. Professional. The kind of flat that isn't unkind, just trained. A pen between his fingers clicks. Click. Click. The aircon hums. A clock on the wall behind him ticks tick tick, same rhythm as the one in my bedroom, same rhythm as the one in every room I ever sit in waiting for someone to tell me what's wrong with me.

"How can I help you?"

To fix my fucking goddamn mind.

But my mouth says something else. My mouth always says something else. My mouth is a mask, my mouth is trained, my mouth is—

The pen clicking. The aircon. The clock. His glasses. The diagnosis on the paper, I can't read from here but I see the font size and the paragraph breaks and somewhere in those paragraphs is a word that names the thing that makes me see everything and do nothing and sit in wardrobes and remember feet hanging and ice cream melting—

He waits. His pen stops clicking. He watches me the way they all watch. Patient. Professional. Silence fills with the aircon and the clock and my breathing, and I hear all of it, all of it at the same volume.

"I've already received the check-up from your GP too."

Paper on his desk. I see the paragraphs from here. Three sections. Bullet points in the second one. The font is small but not small enough to hide the shape of the words and I try to read it upside down from across the desk and—

"How you describe it."

Not a question. A statement. Like he already knows and he gives me the chance to match what the paper says. His glasses still catch

the light. The pen stays still. Waiting. The aircon cycles and the clock behind him and my breathing and his breathing and the fluorescent tube above buzzes in a frequency most people can't hear but I hear it, I always hear it—

My mouth opens. My mouth says something about focus. About not being able to sit still. About the thoughts. My mouth performs the version of me that gets prescriptions. Competent. Self-aware. Using the right vocabulary. Executive dysfunction. Emotional dysregulation. The words come out formatted like I rehearse them because I do, because I always rehearse because the mask knows what doctors need to hear and the mask is the only part of me that still functions.

He nods. Writes something. The pen scratches on paper and I hear the ink moving, I hear the—

"I'd say we can go try to start with the *Dexamphetamine* IR."

What. *Dexamphetamine*. Chakra, shut the fuck up, you are dead, okay. Dead, and your *dex* that you give me in Maastricht from your drawer in your room that doesn't have you in it anymore is now a prescription, is now legal, is now a doctor saying the word like it is medicine and not the thing I take from your bedside table while you are still alive while you are—

Is it true, is it real. Stop. Will it stop soon. Will this stop permanently. Please please please god prescribe me.

His pen moves again. Prescription pad. The scratch of it. His handwriting. I see every letter forming from across the desk, the angle of the pen, the pressure marks.

"Look, next appointment in one month."

One month. The word month and the wardrobe and the knife and the bird and one month is forever, one month is—

Door handle. Exit. Receptionist. She smiles the kind of smile that is a reflex not a feeling. I pay. Card tap. Beep. Receipt I don't take. Light outside. Sun. Cold. Winter. The air hits my face and the

sound of traffic rushes back in like someone turns the volume up on the whole city and—

Run. Not running. Walking fast. The kind of walking that is running without the dignity loss. Chemist. Automatic doors slide open and the smell hits immediately, antiseptic and plastic and artificial lavender from a diffuser on the counter and the fluorescent lights are brighter in here than the psychiatrist's office, everything bright, everything humming.

Counter. I give the prescription. The pharmacist's hands take the paper, her nails painted dark red, one chipped on the in*dex* finger, and her eyes scan the prescription and then scan me and the look, the tiny look that says controlled substance and are you, and I know that look, I see that look, and—

Wait. Wait. Standing by the counter. An old man behind me waits too, his breathing heavy through his mouth. A woman with a pram and the baby makes sounds, not crying, just sounds, just existing. The shelf next to me stacks vitamins, labels too bright, too many fonts, green and orange and white, and the pharmacist's hands in the back open something, count something, the click of pills into a container.

"Here's your medications."

Paper bag. White. Stapled shut.

"Have you taken this before, do you need any booklet?"

Yes I do no thanks please fuck give it to me.

My hands take the bag. The weight of it. Light. Almost nothing. A bag of almost nothing that is supposed to fix everything.

Outside. Sun. Cold. The paper bag in my hand. I swallow it. Right there. I don't wait. I don't go home. I don't follow instructions. The pill is dry in my throat and I swallow and the taste is nothing because pills taste like nothing because they are designed to taste like nothing and the traffic and the bus stop and—

Bus stop. Standing. The paper bag is empty now, crumpled in my pocket. People at the stop and a man on his phone and a woman adjusts her headphones and a kid kicks the bench leg and the sound is metal on metal ringing and the bus is late, the bus is always late, and the traffic and people mumble and shut the fuck up. Fifteen minutes until it hits. That's what they say. Fifteen minutes. How long is it. Five. Maybe five. The sun on my face and the cold air and the traffic over the bridge, the same low wave, and a bird somewhere, different bird, not the screaming one, a different one, and my hands in my pockets and the crumpled paper bag and the pill somewhere inside me, chemical potential.

Has it been fifteen minutes. Has it. The bus still isn't here. The kid still kicks the bench. The woman adjusts her headphones again. The man still talks on his phone, voice low, and I hear every word he says and I don't want to hear every word but I can't stop, and the bird and the traffic and the bench ringing—

Phone buzzes.

Bishop.

The screen lights up and his name and the date. Tonight. I have a date tonight. Bishop tonight and I stand at a bus stop with medication dissolving inside me and the world still at full volume, still arriving, everything still visible, the man's phone screen, the woman's headphone brand, the kid's shoelace untied, and Bishop tonight and the meds not hitting.

***Ashlynn**: finally, legal meds yippie*

I text Ailidh. Not Bishop. The yippie covers the way ahah covers the way lol covers, the way everything I type is a smaller mask for the screen.

Bus pulls up. Brakes hiss. Doors open. The hydraulic sigh. I step on. I tap my card. I find a seat. The seat fabric is rough under my legs and the window vibrates against my shoulder and the bus moves and

the pill inside me shifts, dissolves, does something, and the city slides past the window, every detail still arrives, every face on the street still readable, every sign every shadow every crack in the footpath, still visible, still loud.

Fifteen minutes. Or twenty. Or whenever.

I'm still waiting. Is it working or it won't.

The kid stops kicking the bench. Or I stop hearing it. The man's phone voice fades, not because he stops talking but because my ears stop—something. The window. The vibration against my shoulder. Quieter. When does it get quieter.

Winter starts. In Brisbane you barely notice seasons change. It should be two seasons. It gets colder but a summer-ish cold of Maastricht, dry and sun is winter, people go to the park in winter because it is heaven on earth. I sit looking through the window, a paper bag for my newly prescribed medications, the bus passes over the bridge connecting the CBD and the Southside.

06:00 PM.

I take the bottle from my bag and tip two into my palm and they sit there, chalk white, smaller than they should be for what they do, and I swallow dry and set the timer. Four hours.

Bishop texts about the Valley again, live music, a bar he knows, and I say yes because yes is shorter than explaining why no and explanations are where people start looking at you the way I don't want to be looked at. The part of me that used to calculate every risk before I open my mouth—that part has gone quiet. Not gone. Quiet. Like someone pressed mute but forgot to turn off the screen.

We meet outside the venue and the bass is already leaking through the walls and it should do something to me, it used to do something to me, I used to disappear into bass until there was nothing left but vibration and relief, and now it's just sound, pressure waves hitting my chest, and I register it without entering it.

Inside. Corner stools. Stage behind us. He's talking and his voice is closer than the music, cleaner, and the music loses.

"How's these two weeks been?"

"Got a revelation." I smirk.

"Diagnosed?"

I look at him. How does he—

"How you know why?"

"ADHD too."

"Whoa. What a coincidence."

"*Dexies* or *Ritalin*?"

"*Dex*."

"High demand on the black market." He laughs and Chakra is just there, not invited, the drawer in his room, the way he counted them out like currency, the way high-demand means people like me ration days just to walk upright, and I keep my face still because my face is the only thing between me and being seen.

"I've been through the bureaucracy hell," he says.

"The waiting time right?"

"Six months for me. Thousands of dollars."

"God."

"I don't want to tell you mine."

"Tell it."

"Two weeks for diagnosis. Two months for psychiatrist."

His mouth opens and closes and opens.

"How?"

"Right referral. Just need the right referral."

I hear myself say it, smooth, and the lie still works and that's something.

"Nah but seriously how."

"Seriously. Right referral."

He looks at me and I know he's looking at me but I can't read what the look means, and I used to be able to read what looks

meant, and now there's just the fact of his eyes on my face and the interpretation doesn't arrive, it's somewhere behind me trying to catch up.

"How come you can get diagnosed so fast anyway. Like what makes them take it seriously."

And there it is.

"I drop out several times," I say. "Can't really handle a job too."

My voice flattens as I say it and I'm converting myself into bullet points because bullet points don't bleed.

"Not important," he says. Too fast.

"Yeah."

The word lands between us and sits there.

"I'm on *Vyvanse* now and *Intuniv,*" he says. "Can't ever stop it. No break day like some people suggests."

"How come?"

He looks past me, checking exits or avoiding my face, and I can't tell which, and I used to be able to tell which.

"I'll go insane probably," he says. "I just can't."

The sentence enters me and stays and I understand it the way you understand something written in your own language but the meaning is delayed and the delay means I know what he said and I know what it means and the knowing arrives as observation not as resonance.

Me too.

Right there. Easy. True.

My mouth doesn't open.

The bass keeps going and someone cheers near the stage and his breathing and my breathing and the glass in my hand sweating against my palm.

"Do you want to start to walk somewhere?" he says.

"Yeah. New Farm Park."

Outside and sirens overlapping, police and ambulance, the Valley doing its duet, someone else's emergency layered over whatever this is, and we walk and the sirens fade and footsteps, his and mine, and the park opens up dark and wide and the river is at the edge of it, moving even when I want everything to stop.

I'll go insane probably. I just can't.

It repeats somewhere behind my ribs, delayed, like sound arriving after light, and I understand the repetition and understand what it means and the understanding becomes the stand-in for the feeling.

He leaves space and I can feel him leaving it, an opening, gentle, and he's holding something open for me and I can see the opening, I've always been able to see openings, and my body won't pay what stepping through costs because the cost used to feel worth it and now the cost feels like too much and I don't know when that changed or maybe I do know and just can't feel the knowing.

The river and gravel under shoes and damp air and distant cars and everything arriving at the same volume, nothing louder than anything else, no hierarchy, just input, and the input accumulates and stacks and doesn't resolve into feeling.

"You come here before?" I ask.

"Once. With someone."

"Yeah?"

"It was different then."

He nods and keeps walking.

"Good different or bad different?"

"Just different."

He says it like it costs him something and I can see the opening, I can see exactly where my sentence would go, the one that matches his, the one that says me too, and my mouth is ready and then Ella's voice arrives, not the words, just the tone, the way she said trauma dumping like I'd opened a wound in her living room without

permission, and my mouth closes and I say something about the river instead.

He nods. We keep walking.

The water moves and his hands stay in his pockets and I'm aware that I should be feeling something about this, about the way he answers, about the fact that he's been here with someone before and it was different and now it's this, and the awareness itself becomes the thing I'm experiencing instead of the feeling underneath.

"New Farm decent at night," he says. "Quieter than the Valley."

"Yeah."

Something about next week and I say yeah and the response arrives the way responses arrive when you're on the medication, the way they come from outside yourself and you watch yourself say them and the watching becomes the experience.

His footsteps get quieter and turning and going and I'm still there and the river is still moving and I stand there a bit longer than I need to, not because I'm feeling something but because I'm waiting to feel something and it doesn't come and eventually, I walk home anyway.

10:03 PM. The timer beeps three minutes late. Even the timer can be late. I pull out the bottle. Swallow. Set the timer. Four hours.

Chapter 6: Fall 2024

I

Sun on skin, West End. Vintage store cold inside, gentrified, overpriced. A/C hum, guitar bleeding through from across the road, and Ailidh goes still at the rack.

Racks crammed tight. Price tags swinging from sleeves, $68 for a band tee, $120 for Doc Martens with sole separation, the gentrified math of "vintage" versus "secondhand". Her nails worn at the tips, black polish flaking, fingers disappearing into her sleeve, and I'm watching her not move.

The mechanism that reads these gestures is still there. I can see it. The way her body asks something. The way theft becomes ideology becomes justification becomes movement becomes, it used to matter. Now I understand what she's doing the way you understand something you've memorised but can't quite feel. Like a definition. Like a test answer.

Automated door opens. A stairwell breathes, muffled bass thump vibrating through walls, rhythmic, music. The vintage store sits above the records store, the records store I've been meaning to buy from, the only one I know is Jet Black Cat Music, small in the corner, decorating Vulture Street with the kind of music Ailidh introduced me into, like a corridor you can't unlearn.

Back into April sunlight. It stings after the cold interior, UV sharp on skin, sun overhead casting minimal shadows, sweat immediate on your back. Vulture Street's cracked footpath radiates stored heat, lifted by tree roots in places, uneven concrete underfoot.

"Woolies?" she says, like it's just an errand.

I nod because the sun stings, stabs, makes me barely think about anything, not even the thought, the thoughts lost. Walking toward Boundary Street, bus air brakes screeching, constant cars hum hum hum, scooter randomly breezing in, a thread of noise that never ends.

Fridge aisle. Cold hits. Bottles behind glass sweating and Ailidh's nails sliding smooth against plastic, practiced, the way someone who's done this before does it. I understand the doing. I understand the why behind it. The understanding arrives but the feeling doesn't.

"Ailidh, I think you actually do need therapy," I say.

"Already have my self-awareness. It's pointless. Last time," she starts.

"Not for your BPD," I say. "For your kleptomania."

She smiles, sharp. "HEY. I'm doing a favour for the movement. Food's supposed to be free."

"Yeah," I say, "but last week you stole a pair of Dr Martens."

"We don't talk about that."

Outside again. Sun still stings and I'm aware I should feel something about what just happened, about Ailidh's need, about the way she converts breaking into meaning, and the awareness itself becomes the stand-in for the feeling. I nod or I don't nod. The response arrives anyway.

The mechanism that makes it feel like my response is somewhere behind it. We walk back into humidity and the guitar is still bleeding through and I'm watching her watching the street like she's calculating something and maybe she is and maybe I used to know what that calculation felt like.

Smoke fogs. Clove cigarette. I smoke.

Boundary Street at night, traffic thinned but still present, buses still running, cars with headlights, occasional taxi, the city refusing to fully go quiet. Street lights cast pools of yellow-white on the footpath and everyone steps in and out of it like a flicker, half face,

half shadow, like you can choose which half you show, like you can curate visibility.

The Bearded Lady entrance spills light onto the street. People smoking, talking, light hitting their cheeks and leaving the rest of them undecided. Cigarette embers are bright points, little red eyes blinking. Mouths moving, laughter, cough, someone says "fuck" like punctuation, like it's a comma they can speak.

Music still audible from inside, muffled now because we're outside, bass-heavy, like a fist wrapped in cloth. It pushes through the wall anyway. It sits in my sternum anyway, the way a feeling sits when you don't want it to.

Down the street, *Govindas* dark now, closed. *Jet Black Cat*'s window lit or dark depending on where I stand, depending on my angle, depending on whether I want to pretend I can still walk in and buy a record and be normal for ten minutes. The neighbourhood's night character, quieter than day but not silent, bars and venues active, residential streets settling, and underneath it all that distant Brisbane hum, never quite silent, like an engine idling in the background of my skull.

Wind through trees. Leaves shiver. If the wind's right there's that faint river smell, damp-metal, algae-sweet, then gone. Exhaust from passing cars. Cigarette smoke immediate, sticky, in hair, in clothes. Someone's takeaway smell drifts past, Thai or Vietnamese, fish sauce and sugar and heat, then it thins out and becomes smoke again.

Temperature drop noticeable against skin that was sun-heated hours ago. My shirt still holds damp at the back. Cold touches it and it goes clammy and my body does that small shiver like it's trying to remember it's alive, like the nervous system is checking in, hello, you still here.

Ailidh beside me. Her presence and the space between bodies, the distance you can measure without looking. She's there but not here, and I can feel her clocking exits without calling it clocking.

Window reflection, corner, alley mouth. Exits. Always exits. Nails pick the filter. Thumb taps the lighter even when nothing's lit, tap tap tap, metronome, like if she keeps tapping she won't have to answer anything.

She giggles again, wrong beat. Not happy. Just too much. Like her body picks noise over words because words would make it real and real would mean she has to do something and she doesn't know what to do. Laugh as cover. Laugh as shield. Laugh as please don't look too close.

And the awareness arrives, the one I keep having today, that I should feel something about her need, about the stealing, about the way she converts breaking into meaning, food's supposed to be free, movement, ideology, justification, and I can recite it and still fail. The awareness sits where feeling is supposed to be. Like a placeholder. Like a draft. Like a response that never loads, spinning wheel in my chest.

Traffic hum, bass thump, embers, pooled streetlight, smoke and exhaust and river-ghost smell. Me standing in it, knowing, not feeling, and pretending knowing is enough because if it isn't enough then what is, what else do I have.

Ailidh, "What is that," like she's curious, like she's not already ten steps ahead of me. I pull one, then two, "You want?"

Smoke. Exhale. Throat burn, sweet-spice.

"Holy shit, Ash," she says, "it's like chai."

Until I show her the nicotine and tar and I tell her it's the cancer machine and she does that face, drop-drop, like she doesn't care but she cares enough to react, like her body still has reflexes even when her brain is somewhere else.

She's more enthusiastic than usual. Loud-bright. Too bright. I'd ask what's wrong but I won't because asking makes it real and real makes it stick and I don't know if I can hold another thing that sticks.

Guitar muffled through walls, chords strung, rhythm doing something to the air. I can't process the music but her giggles I do, giggles on the wrong beat, giggles that aren't happy, just too much, like her body picks noise over words because words would make it real.

Night wind humid, sweat stuck under shirt, air thick, like it's grabbing my ribs and squeezing, like breathing is manual again.

She clocks the street without looking like she's clocking it. Window reflection, corner, alley mouth. Exits. Always exits. Nails pick the filter. Thumb taps the lighter even when nothing's lit. Tap tap tap, like the lighter is her metronome, like if she keeps tapping she won't have to answer anything.

"What happened," I ask. I do concern. It's rare. It feels like acting even when it's real, I hate that.

"Manic cycle this time, or—"

"No no no no," she cuts in too fast, giggle-flood, "I just did it, you know," giggle again like if she keeps laughing the sentence can't land.

"I don't understand."

"I get it," she says, still laughing like a leak. "Why you keep doing it."

"That thing," my throat tightens because we both know what thing. "Hey, Ailidh. What happened."

Giggle, then she points at her thigh like a joke, like if she makes it a joke it won't be real, and I don't want to look and I don't mean to be—

"They will never understand and they never did," she says, and it spills out anyway, like it's been waiting behind the giggle. "I was back again with that psycho tradie guy and then, oh, and then he was like that again."

"What the fuck you mean by that," I say, and my voice comes out sharper than I want. "Just please break up with him, Ailidh."

"It's hard," she says, and the giggle tries to come back but it can't hold it fully, "I love him, and we were talking about getting a house and married and—"

"Ailidh."

"He told me he only wanted with me because—" stop. The giggle returns thin, like it hurts, like it's scraping her throat. "He texts one of my ex and says I did him dirty because of something and something and something."

Something and something and something, always something, always fog, always never the sentence that would make you choose. Like she's edging around the actual thing because if she says it, it exists, if she says it, it becomes proof and proof demands action and action is a trap.

She takes a drag like it's medicine. Smoke covers her face for half a second, thank you smoke, then her face is back. Flicks ash too neat, too controlled. Like she can control ash but not men. Like she can't control her laugh either, that's the point.

"I know it's fucked," she says, a smile like a bruise. "Don't do your therapist voice. I know. I know."

Music haze, pedals effect, hazy and hazy, my brain trying to turn it into dreampop, but it's just noise. Pattern like Ella, no, scarier. Like Ella but in a male body and getting physical and d—my stomach drops just thinking it.

"Did you share Find My with him as well," I say too fast, practical like a shield. "Did you say anything today where you—"

Giggle again. Eyes not matching. Eyes flat while mouth keeps going. Hand slides into the sleeve like she wants to disappear into fabric, into cotton, into nothing. Like she wants to be small enough to not be grabbed.

Then she nudges my cigarette pack closer with her boot. Not looking at me. Not saying anything. Just, here. An act. A tenderness that pretends it isn't.

I go to the toilet for a bit. I regret it the second I stand. I know I should and shouldn't, and I do it anyway.

Toilet light too white, too white in my head even if it isn't. Tap drip. Mirror. My face in pieces, in tiles, in glare. Pupils huge or small, can't tell. Hands wet. Soap smell. That cheap hospital-adjacent soap smell even though it's a bar bathroom and not a ward, but my brain doesn't care, fluorescent is fluorescent, white is white, and my body remembers white as threat.

The old link. Indonesian. The groomer. I escaped. Went abroad. He did worse to someone else. She texted me. I told her cops, system, help. System failed anyway. But she's alive.

My friend in that city, same city, texted me, we got that piece of shit, found him, prepping something, tracked him, Noel beat him up and Gusti, all of them we used to play Counter-Strike together, de*dust2, and now that guy got dusted, stupid word.*

The victim was their closest friend. I didn't really know her, just that one time she texted me and I answered like I was useful, like I could route her into safety through a screen, cops, system, help, and I'm glad, oh I'm glad because she's alive because she gets to keep being a person and not a headline.

And still the groomer, what he says is what he actually did, that's the worst part, the confidence of it, the entitlement of it, like his mouth was a blueprint, like words were never warning, just announcement.

Air different, like someone changed the setting. Crowd reshuffled. The night rearranged itself while I was gone. Boots on concrete behind the music. The music still bleeding through walls like it never negotiates, it just exists.

Flannel pattern in my peripheral like static. Like TV snow. Like a threat, I can't name yet but my spine already knows.

Ailidh's giggle is louder now. Too bright. Flare-bright. Like she's trying to make it not happen by making sound first. Like if she laughs

first she gets to control the ending. Like if she keeps laughing, the sentence can't land. Like if she keeps laughing, she won't have to pick.

He's next to her.

He turns. He comes toward me.

"Hey dude."

"Man to man talk," he says, and the words are a claim, like he owns the air, like he owns the space between us, like he owns her too, like he sees people through genitals and hierarchy and that's it, the whole world flattened into a ladder.

"What," I say.

I look at Ailidh and she giggles and giggles and I can see she doesn't know what to do with her hands. Hands empty, hands hiding, hands in sleeve, hands doing nothing. The giggle is holding her together. The giggle is the tape. If she stops laughing she'll have to choose and choices are knives and she's always holding the blade end.

"Why the fuck you told my girlfriend to break up with me," he asks.

"You know, it's just a rational choice," I say, and it isn't the first time, I told her over the phone, over and over, text, I guess he saw and saw and saved it like ammo.

His body tense. Jaw clenched. Eyes flat, empty. I know it. I know where it will go because I've seen the empty eyes before and empty eyes always mean impact, always mean someone gets hurt and later they say it wasn't that bad and later it becomes a story you tell like a joke and everyone laughs because laughing is safer than saying the other word.

Ailidh laughs again. Too loud.

And I hate her for one second for laughing like that, then I hate myself for thinking it, because I know it's not funny, she's just full,

too full, overflow. Laugh as life jacket. Laugh as don't hit me. Laugh as please don't make me say it.

He's tall for my height. Actual tall. He blocks light. He blocks air. And my body does that inventory thing, exits, angles, distance to door, distance to security, the way survival becomes math.

I blend into the crowd. I already see security near the doorway, high-vis edge, radio at shoulder, and I move like it's automatic, like I've done it before, like survival is a muscle and mine is overtrained.

I say anything that makes them move fast. Truth doesn't matter when fists do.

"Tall guy, blonde, flannel jacket."

They nod. They step. They look.

Behind me the guitar keeps bleeding through walls like nothing happened, like music doesn't care who gets hit, like the night keeps going, humid, sticky, full of smoke, full of giggles that aren't joy, just too much.

And I can still taste clove. Sweet-spice. Tar. My throat burned.

And I can still hear her laugh even when she stops.

I'm sorry, Ailidh.

II

Thursday night and the rain is doing that Jakarta thing, not heavy, not dramatic, just persistent, drizzle drizzle drizzle, like the sky can't commit to a storm but it also can't stop, and it makes me remember nights after school when the room was dark before it should've been dark, no sunlight, the kind of dark that feels like a closed door, and I was alone then too, same posture, same phone in my hand, same waiting for something to arrive and nothing arrives.

Phone, nothing.

Notifications, one promotional spam email, the kind of subject line that pretends it knows my name. Instagram, nothing, stories, instastories, people living like it's easy, I can't and I can't and I can't, the screen glare too bright, brightness hurts and the hurt goes

straight to wrist, wrist, wrist, the wrist, my wrist, the word wrist becomes a place and I can feel it even when I'm not touching it, like the skin remembers for me and—

What did I say in Jakarta, cat, I said cat. A cat scratched me. Or I was building something, a *Gundam* kit, plastic, harmless, childish, anything but the truth. Now I'm too old for that lie, or maybe the lie is too random now, it doesn't even fit the shape of my life, it doesn't match the angle of my body in this bed, the way I keep scrolling like scrolling is prayer.

The phone vibrates.

Vibrates again.

Reminder—or not reminder, a message—and I flinch anyway because vibration means attention and attention means consequences, it means someone can see me, it means I have to be a person back, it means I have to choose the right tone.

Oh, Bishop.

"picnic highgate hill?" three days ago.

Seen.

Three days and nothing from him, and vulnerable is scary, but I tried anyway, I risked it, I opened the door and the door welcomed no one, and Ailidh's voice is in my head, abandon them first before they abandon you, again and again, maybe she's right, might be she's always right, so my brain tries to make a joke out of it, haha I win, they can't abandon me if I do it first, except my chest is still panicking, my hands are still panicking, the whole body still waiting for the second stamp, the one that says you were stupid to think— wrote her three times, or four. Can't verify now. The number keeps changing when I look at it. Three feels right except there was the fourth one, the one that didn't send, the one that lived in drafts for a week before I deleted it, so four. probably four. First one is an apology. For something I still can't name — too much, the mental health becoming her problem, the way I looked at her when she

said the words. second one: why. just why. like understanding the mechanism was going to do something. third one shorter: can you tell me what I did. Third one the worst one because the question is still in my chest somewhere, can't find it, can't get it out, just presses. fourth one I delete. by then the silence is the answer and I know what the answer is. she was never going to revise the verdict— asked Juliette once. handwritten letter. pages. apology and explanation and please, just, tell me. Juliette took it. came back. empty-handed. "She threw it away," Juliette said, careful with her voice, "Straight to the bin. Didn't even—" then the other part. The part Juliette started and almost stopped: "She justified it because she saw you based on your genitals. Not you. Just—" Juliette didn't finish that sentence either. "Don't listen to her. She's sounds like a bitch anyway." Didn't need to. so the letter was an idiot. I know that now. Idiot because silence was already the answer before the letter, during the letter, the whole time I was writing I'm sorry I'm sorry deep down you always have a space. Silence was already the answer and I was writing into it anyway. She chose someone who wasn't there.

If he wants to, he will. If he doesn't, he won't. I've given up on people. I don't understand them. I can never read them, I can never tell if a yes is real or just politeness, I can never tell if warmth is warmth or just a person being decent before they disappear.

Maybe this is what it is, the pattern again, first date curse, second date curse, sparks curse, I don't know, but it always becomes this, always becomes silence, always becomes me staring at a screen waiting for a sentence that never arrives.

Be myself and I'm too much, too intense, too needy, too fast, too honest, too mentally ill, and they run anyway, and then I'm alone again, but at least I'm alone as myself, except myself is the thing they leave.

The more, the merrier, until I bleed to maintain it. Exhaustion. Burnout. Meltdown. The performance doesn't end when the date

ends, it follows me home, it sits in my chest, it keeps asking did you say the wrong thing, did you text too fast, did you miss a cue, did you fail the test, did you make him feel trapped, did you make him feel responsible, did you make him see the wrist without even showing it.

To perform in order to be desired, to be loved—

But it isn't love if it is for the character and not the actor. That's what I keep coming back to, like a knife I can't put down. If he likes the mask, he doesn't like me. If he likes me, he will see the mask and still stay. If he stays only while the mask is on, he was never staying.

Absent authenticity, it becomes work without breaks, until death knocks, until the body gives up, until the mind says enough, until the only way to stop performing is to stop existing.

Seen. Still seen. No message.

And I can't cry, and I can't breathe, and I can't do anything except stand here and learn, again, how to stand through it.

Red badges stack.

Not Bishop.

Another and another and another, H logo like a small wound, white background, pressure behind my eyes, eight nine ten, I don't know, louder than the rain, louder than my own thoughts because it's visual and it won't shut up and it keeps saying you're failing, you're failing, you're failing—

One new match.

I don't open it.

The world is fossilising—not the whole world, just me, just my room—like I've been left too long in the same position and everything is hardening around me, and I can't do it, it repeats, cycle, they leave, and I call it the first date curse, second date curse, sparks curse, I don't know, anything that makes it fate instead of pattern, anything that means it isn't me, anything that means I'm not—

I tried to be myself, they leave.

I tried to perform, they leave.

Or it ends up like Ella, where I performed until the performance cracked and then the real thing showed and she looked at it and her face changed and that was the end, the end like a door closing, the end like "space to process" and never coming back and—

Friday afternoon.

The rain continues. Drizzle, drizzle, drizzle, constant but not heavy, just present, just enough to make everything wet and nothing fresh. I've been in bed for—I don't know how long—time has stopped feeling like numbers and started feeling like weight, like the mattress is holding me down on purpose.

Ailidh was wrong about one thing, the guilt isn't a feeling like sadness or anger, it's not a wave, it's a weight behind my ribs, heavy and heavier, like a second heart made of stone. Using humans as placeholders—I can't. Using them, collecting them, lining them up so I don't feel empty—I can't because I know what that turns people into when you're in crisis, objects, anchors, tools, and I hate that I'm capable of that, I hate that my brain has that mode, crisis mode, survival mode.

But I'm alone.

Void and void and void, nothing.

2/5/2024 on the lock screen, digits look clinical, like a label on a file. Calendar, nothing, empty. Lecture I should go—I didn't and I didn't, and now it's too late to pretend I just forgot, too late to pretend it was accidental, too late to pretend I'm still trying.

Nothing. Rain drizzles. I feel sparked then gone, like someone lit a match near me and then walked away and left me holding the smoke. Medicated or not medicated, people ghost me, what's wrong, what's wrong, I don't know, and I hate how my brain keeps begging for one simple thing, one text bubble, one sentence, just say something so I can stop writing the rest of the story for you in my head, so I can stop filling your silence with knives—

Medication should work, right.

But does it.

It makes me more alone, lonely and alone because it gives me enough control to isolate properly. Rain drizzles. I stare at the Rotterdam platform in my head—the rain there too—drizzle again, same sound in a different country, like my body carries weather around, like every city I've lived in shares one sky and I'm stuck under it.

Phone buzz.

Hinge, one new match.

I open it and eight notifications glare back, unread, unanswered, not yet, not ever, and the guilt punches again because I can't use people to fill the void, I can't and I can't, but I'm alone and being alone makes you stupid, it makes you want anyone, it makes you want proof you still exist, proof you're still visible, proof you haven't already—

Texting back feels useless because I can already see the exit, I can already feel them running, not because they're evil because it's normal to run from a person like me, the way I talk too much, the way I go quiet too hard, the way my brain attaches and panics, or the wrist—always the wrist—the rumor of it, the possibility of it, the thing I hide until it leaks.

Nothing leads to none.

None leads to nothing.

I'm just tired.

Friends are harder to find in real life, and then when someone says "hey hangout," my body acts like it's a test and I fail it by being too much or not enough, and I don't know which, I don't know, I don't know, the question loops because the answer keeps moving.

I'm scared and all I have are notifications, red, stacked, waiting, like tiny alarms I refuse to silence because if I silence them, then it means I admit I'm not going to reply, it means I admit I'm not going to live inside other people's timelines, it means I'm choosing—

Rain drizzles again and again.

What date is it.

Oh, 2/5/2024.

Two weeks since I hung out with Ailidh, since I talked to anyone properly, and four weeks more before another appointment. Four weeks is a long time when your brain is hungry, when your brain eats itself for breakfast and calls it coping.

Why do I talk so much before, why do I turn into this chatterbox version of myself, needy and needy to talk, craving human social needs like it's oxygen, and then the medications make me don't—or they make me can't—and I don't know which is worse, the craving or the flatness, and I'm scared to be left and abandoned so I isolate and isolate because at least if I'm alone it's my choice, except it isn't, it never feels like my choice, it feels like being shoved gently into a corner and then told it was—

I keep hearing the psychiatrist's pen click in my head, click click click, like a metronome, like an accusation.

Please—which one is the right one.

One tablet, one capsule, *dex*, *vyvanse*, booster, all these names for the same thing, adjust the brain so it behaves, adjust the brain so it doesn't scare people, adjust the brain so it doesn't scare me, adjust adjust adjust until I'm tolerable, until I'm quiet, until I'm easy to hold without—

Look forward—cold.

Metal.

Stainless. The kind of cold that bites, and I don't even know what I'm looking at yet, but my body recognises it, hospital cold, clinic cold, disinfected cold, like the smell of alcohol wipes is already in my nose and my stomach drops before my brain catches up.

The cold becomes thought.

Slow and slow and nothing.

Like that time I broke my finger in front of my teacher and something in me snapped—dissociated—accused me of something I didn't do—dehumanised me in front of everyone—bone crack, shock, and then hospital, surgical room, fluorescent light so white it feels like it's erasing you.

The surgeon's voice calm like weather.

"Did you feel anything," he says.

No, I didn't.

"Why."

And I answer like it's normal because I don't know how to answer anything else, "the local anaesthetic worked."

Oh.

Okay.

That's good, isn't it.

Fluorescent hum hum hum, beep and beep, and he says put support in the bone so it regenerates stronger, put something in so it heals, like bodies are honest like that, like you can reinforce them and they obey.

But brains don't.

Souls don't.

I didn't realise you can regenerate numbness too— I didn't realise it comes back so easily, comes back like a switch, and there's that colour, crimson, it happens and happens and the room gets quieter for one second, and it calms me because it ends feeling, not because it's beautiful, not because I'm an artist because it stops the noise, and that's the part that scares me, how much relief lives inside harm, how simple it is to—

God.

The word drops out of me even when I don't mean it, even when I don't believe it. I bargain anyway. I always bargain. I say I will convert, I will try, just this time, just let me, just let it end, and the desperation makes me hate myself because I don't even know who

I'm talking to, I just need someone bigger than me to stop me from being me.

Tears drop down my cheeks, water on my skin, salt on my lips, and I don't know why I'm crying suddenly because I thought I was happy, I thought relief was happiness, I thought this is it, no one's here, no one can prevent me like in Maastricht, fate in my hand, my hand full of will, and then the fluorescent light reminds me again, reminds me that even in rooms where nobody loves you they still keep you alive.

A knock.

I wake up on it.

Oh, it's Ailidh.

I was meant to go to the library after work, right after 6 pm, and she knocks and I say I can't, and something in me makes a sound that isn't a scream but wants to be, and she looks fine—too fine—like she's practiced being fine, and she drags me to her car and I don't know, I don't want to go into another fluorescent light in Brisbane, it's scary, in Jakarta it was scary for my father's wallet, here it's scary because it forces me to continue because it makes tomorrow exist.

Fluorescent light that is way too white.

I remember it—just five months ago.

No scream and no beeps, just tack tack tack footsteps, the march of someone trained to save lives as I sit waiting, and the sound of those shoes is its own language, it says you are a problem we know how to process.

"Ash, Ashlynn," he says again.

That guy with the white hair, glasses, weathered, the ER psychiatrist, same night, same hours, and I hate that my body remembers him like a landmark, like trauma has GPS.

"What medication did you take today," he says.

"Dextroamphetamine," I say. "I took five milligrams twice."

"So why are you here."

He says it like it's a form field, like if I give the correct answer, the printer will spit out a solution.

"You already have so much support," he says, and I can hear the page turning in his voice, "and last time we referred you into our crisis care. I can see you already have an ongoing psychologist and psychiatrist."

Support.

As if support is a shield.

As if support stops your brain from eating itself.

I want to tell him about diagnosis words, ADHD, autism, not BPD like you accused me of, I want to be petty, I want to correct him like a student correcting a teacher, but I don't have the energy, and I don't want to perform competence in front of fluorescent light, I don't want to be impressive, I want to be—

"I don't know," I say.

He clicks his pen. Click click click. Scribble, not neat, not elegant, just administrative.

"Abandonment," I say because it's the only word I can find that isn't a whole essay. "Alone. Self-isolating."

"You got any support or friend," he says, and the question is stupid because it's the same question in a different font, the same question in every room, the same question that assumes the problem is quantity of people and not the way my brain turns people into—

He looks confused. The fluorescent light flickers, hum, hum, hum, and the hum reminds me always, fluorescent light is never just light, it's a sound that says you're being watched.

"So how can we help you."

I don't know, doctor.

I think of exits I'm not allowed to take, countries that feel like myths when you're this tired, Switzerland, the Netherlands, tabs open on a laptop like a prayer you don't want anyone to see, and then I hate myself for thinking it because thinking it makes it more real, it

makes it more reachable, it makes it less like a thought and more like a map.

"Nothing," I say. "I don't know."

"From the files you already got all your support," he starts again because files are more believable than people because paper has evidence and pain doesn't.

"My psychiatrist appointment is in four weeks," I say.

He can't prescribe like last time because I'm "under care," and he gives me paper with scribble, a word I skim, discharge reason, like my life is a box you can tick and send home.

I leave.

God, I say again outside because the habit of begging is stronger than belief because the word still comes out even when I don't know who it's for. Please just let me go. That's the only thing that would make me Your believer.

I text Ailidh, thanks. Sorry about today. I'll shout you dinner tomorrow.

The rain keeps falling.

I walk home through it, and the rain doesn't care, it keeps tapping the pavement like a reminder I can't swipe away—drizzle drizzle drizzle—until I'm back in my room, back in the dark, back with the phone in my hand, waiting for something to arrive and already knowing what it will be.

III

"I probably will never get it."

Ailidh's lighter clicks in the silence—no flame, just the sound. Her eyes find mine, then drift past my shoulder, scanning for something I can't name, the way you check a horizon for weather coming.

"Get what," she says.

"Being normal," I say, "Being loved without paying for it."

Her mouth tightens. Not disgust, not annoyance, more like pain trying to be practical.

"Everything in yours is just," she starts, and I can hear her reach for the wrong words because she doesn't want to say the right ones—"you're dependent on the big pharma stuff."

She says big pharma and the words hang between us, sharp-edged, but her face doesn't match them. Her eyes carry weight, exhaustion pooled in the corners, and something that looks like fury aimed at everything except me—at the world that made pills the cost of staying upright, not as a joke, not as a conspiracy theorist, more like grief dressed up as language.

"It's not like it was your choice anyway," she says, and her voice drops, steadier, careful, "You're strong enough to made it this far."

Then, quieter, like she's placing something down instead of throwing it, "You don't even have a home, a country, no one to call home and no place to call it either."

She knows. The thought arrives before I can stop it.

And it hits the exact hollow place, the one that doesn't bruise purple, it just caves in.

I laugh once. Dry. No humour. A cough disguised as laughter. Even my grief performs incorrectly. Even this, I can't do right.

"I'm fine now," I say, "It's my first time in a while, being ghosted."

"Good," she says, immediate, and there's real relief there. "Forget about him. He sucks, probably. Not that cool anyway."

I want to believe her. I want the sentence to be enough. I want words to work like pills, swallow, wait fifteen minutes, relief.

"But—" I paused.

"Before Bishop, I leave them first. It still haunts me even until now."

"It's just," she keeps going, and her voice is steady in a way mine isn't, "you'll feel this way after heaps, probably countless of them. It's not that easy at first."

"Countless," I repeat, like it's a number I can survive, like if I say it out loud it becomes math instead of grief.

"Being mentally ill, clinically insane, whatever label they stamp," she says, and her voice doesn't waver, doesn't apologise for the weight of it, "doesn't mean you're not worth choosing."

She pauses, like she's deciding whether to risk softness.

"Probably someday," she adds, and her voice retreats into something quieter, "one day."

And my face does nothing, no tears, no relief, just that cry without tears that sits in my chest like a stone. I sit through it anyway.

"You know what," I say, and she doesn't rush me, doesn't fill the silence. "If he wants to, he will. If he doesn't, he won't. Simple rule."

She nods, slow, like she's heard this before, maybe said it herself.

"Yeah," she says.

"Is it better to be desired, or to be yourself?" I ask.

"Either way, I end up blaming myself for different reasons."

She takes a long drag, holds it, exhales slow. "The performance thing?"

"The more I perform myself, the better things go," I say, "but the more I disappear. Everything becomes effort. I'm alone in crowds, smiling on schedule like I'm clocked in for a shift."

"The more, the merrier," she says, bitter, "until you bleed to maintain it."

"I'd be exhausted and burnout — worse autistic meltdown," I say.

She shrugs.

Then we just sit on the grass in front of the State Library, sun going down slow, twilight breaking through the leaves like it can't decide where to land, and the grass keeps touching my skin every time I move, cold-green, itchy-soft, like the world still wants to contact even when I don't.

The lighter clicks. Flame catches tobacco, catches weed. Ailidh cups her hand around the fire, chin tucked down, and her hair falls

forward—the black that's grown out blonde at the roots, months of not caring enough to touch it up—curtaining her face as she breathes in.

"Smoke?" she says, holding it out.

I look at it. The joint sits between her fingers like an invitation, paper twisted at the end, smoke curling up lazy and familiar. The craving hits first in my chest, then spreads out to my fingertips, that old pull toward anything that might make the noise go quiet for a few hours.

"I can't anymore," I say.

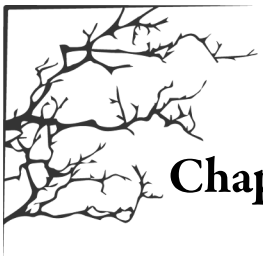
Ailidh hums, like she already knew.

"Not on these meds," I add, and I tap my pocket like the prescription is a leash.

She laughs once, quiet, not mean.

"Messina?" she says.

"Yeah."



Chapter 7: Spring 2024

I

October comes with purple. November leaves with purple.

Purple — jacarandas. I didn't know what they were before I moved here. Until now. The petals stick to my shoes when I walk. Purple crowns against blue sky, then the slow drift downward, coating footpaths and car windshields. When they bloom again next year, I'll know a full cycle has passed.

"You are draining, Lynn. Did you know that?" I say to myself. "You're always sad, always talking sadly, or turning up with a fresh mark. What do you think people want from someone like you? Why can't you just stop being sad for the first time in your life? No one wants to be around people like you. Just sad —"

"I know," I answer.

"I moved, changed my name, my face, left people behind for."

"I accept they go not because of who I am, not because I deserve that, not as a punishment. But you, you try to cut them off before they make their choice. That's what you believe, isn't it, Lynn?"

I never said that.

"It's meaningless the way you keep justifying them. It's not for us to decide whether they need saving from us. It's theirs. You keep trying, trying, and trying to make people choose you."

"I try and try because I want to be chosen —"

"If they never consider it at the first time, they won't, no matter how you please them, unless you become someone they desire so similar to them, the way you act, talk. Yet look at you now."

"Look at me now? Look at YOU now, Ash. You are all alone. One friend I'd never had that few before. I bleed because I was scared to be alone — to be by myself. To be with YOU."

"None of those things make me unlovable or forbidden to love someone."

"It is because we keep hurting people over and over again, we are the problem because of the way our minds work."

"It's not theirs to decide what we do toward ourselves. There is no start and end, unlike how you view the world. You were scared, I'm not."

The bird chirping, wind breeze, and the street noises.

"Am I too mentally ill to love or be loved?"

Not a question anymore. I stop asking it like one.

The jacarandas are wilting. Petals on the pavement. Purple scattering like something sacred, ordinary.

My reminder beeps. Three hours since my usual one. The phone screen glows in my palm.

I take out the bottle. *Vyvanse*. 50 mg. Habit. Routine. Maintenance.

I hold it for a moment. The petals keep falling.

Strangely, staying alive feels more like a revolt now.

I will never be healed. I will never finish trying to find my identity. I will never actually disappear. I will never be able to fully hide.

I can see the whole Brisbane CBD from here. I walk toward the big tree on the hill. There is no one else today. Fortunate.

People get on. People get off.

The medication doesn't change that. It just makes me stop caring when they leave. It lets me function. Get out of bed. Go to class. Turn in assignments. Shower. Eat something. Sleep at reasonable hours.

But it doesn't make me want to do any of it.

The voices are quieter now. Not gone. Quieter. But it is just the same rotation, day after day, like a machine someone forgets to turn off.

I miss you, Lynn. You were the one who cries over movies. Who laughs too loud. Who falls in love recklessly. Who needs people so desperately it scares them away.

She is somewhere. Buried. Silenced. By me.

I even miss the pain.

However, I miss understanding it. The canvas is still here. Scars fade but remain. White lines across my forearms. A roadmap of the year before. Now I can't remember what the pain feels like. I can't access the logic that made it necessary. I call it amputation.

I hurt people. I scared them so badly they ran.

After Ella —

I say something honest — not even heavy, just honest — and she uses a word for it that closes the door. I learn the lesson quickly. I stop saying the interior thing. I write around it instead. And then I stop writing too because they come from the same place, the writing and the saying, and once you cut one the other goes quiet. The page stays blank because the part of me that knows what to put there got silenced along with the part that used to speak.

My phone buzzes.

Ibu: How are you? Haven't heard from you in a while.

I put the phone down.

I pull the second bottle from my pocket. The SNRI. The one that made me suicidal before. The one I started carrying again last week, just in case, though I haven't told the psychiatrist yet. I look at both bottles.

To choose patience. Forgiveness. To begin again.

The words feel like someone else's mouth.

My usual spot. The buttress roots rising out of the ground like the tree is trying to hold itself together — thick ribs of wood I can

sit on, solid, grounding, like the tree lends me its weight. Under the canopy the air drops a few degrees. The light breaks into patches on the grass. Bright, then gone. Bright, then gone.

I look up at the branches. They grow into themselves without permission. Without a plan, I can understand. If someone cuts it back early it stays small forever. It stays potential. It stays clean.

But it doesn't.

It grows anyway.

If I end earlier — really end, one of those eight times before — I wouldn't know any of this. The warmth and the rot. The brief calm. The way love feels like rescue until it turns into another thing I lose.

But I also don't know this. Functional. A flatline that feels like a different kind of death.

I know no one is coming. Not in the way I need. I know the cost doesn't stop just because the symptoms do.

I open my backpack. The bottles.

I look at them. I don't move.

Sunlight keeps breaking through. Bright, then gone. The wind shifts the branches and the pattern changes.

Birdsong thins at the edges. The wind softens. Then softens again. Even the magpies go quiet.

I pour it all into my hands. Capsules and tablets, orange and white and pale blue.

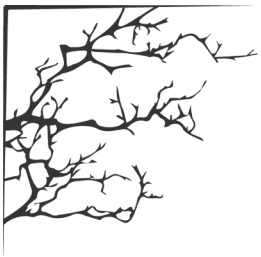
I have left before. Different city. Same problem. Same loop starting fresh somewhere I don't know anyone, like distance was a treatment. Like geography could outrun what lives inside my head.

This is not that.

I don't know what this is. But I'm still here. Still in the same suburb. Still under the same tree. My body feels heavy — heavy and tired like how I always fall asleep watching late night movies and then my father from the living room tried to carry me into bed like it was nothing. Relief, I think. Or something close.

I stare at my hands.
My heart beats too fast.
The reminder beeps again.
And again.
And my eyes close.

Act III: Jakarta



Chapter 0

I

I opened my eyes and I didn't wake up, I hear an old fan above the whiteboard doing its croaking tack tack tack like it's choking on itself.

A wavy black-haired shoulder-length girl pokes my shoulder once twice again, and she says my nickname, the one I haven't used in a long time, the one I didn't have to earn.

"What the hell," I say, "I'm sleeping."

And I say it and my voice hasn't deepened and that lands wrong in my mouth because my head is full of Brisbane and pills and adulthood and the taste of plastic bottles and I shouldn't sound like this, I shouldn't be this small.

I touch my face, flawless, no stubble, no facial hair. I look at my wrist. Smooth. Something wrong with that, something I can't name yet. My stomach drops because it's not just the voice, it's the skin too, like time never happened, like I got peeled back to a version of me that still thought the future was one thing, clean, simple.

"They called you to go up first," she says, and she looks past me for a second like there's a camera I can't see, "since today it's not based on the attendance list."

Attendance list, a normal word, but she says it like it's a register, like you're not a student you're a name on paper and the paper decides, and I don't know why that scares me more than anything.

"Huh," I say, "I don't get it, for what?"

"English oral exam practice."

"Read the whiteboard," she says, "where have you been?"

Where have you been, as if I chose to vanish, as if I wasn't just under that tree at Highgate Hill with the skyline staring back at me and the reminder beep drilling into my skull.

She wears a white shirt and a blue skirt, blue skirt, blue and I look down at my pants, blue, and I remember, middle school, the uniform, and it makes her look like a version of herself that belongs to rules, but her shoulder is angled toward me like she's trying to block the wind, like she's making a small shelter out of her body.

I look at the whiteboard.

The ink that shows the date is smeared over the whiteboard, I can only catch the clear part, *2016, English oral exam practice! Introduce yourself and answer the question based on your number. 5 minutes!*

"I forgot to tell you," she says, quick, like it's a rule and she hates that it's a rule, "don't look at the date."

"Oh, thanks," I say, and it comes out stupidly normal, like we're still just two kids whispering in class, like this isn't intake disguised as school.

I have the second one.

"Who's the first one?" I say.

"The teacher, obviously," she says, "for example."

For example, like this is a template, like I'm supposed to watch and copy, like performance is still the currency even here, even in whatever this is.

The air is sticky and thick against my skin and I look out the window and it's sunset, pale, bleached, like someone turned the saturation down, like end-of-day light without warmth, and my brain goes, sunset, but we're in school, why is it sunset, why is it always sunset when something is ending.

I look back at her.

"Why are we still in school," I say, "isn't it sunset already?"

"Student leadership training," she says.

And the words come out too clean, too rehearsed, like she's repeating a sentence she was told to say, and I see her mouth tighten after, like she hates it, like the sentence isn't hers.

She lies, or she doesn't. I'm not supposed to know the difference yet, and I remember that guy on the front-left seat, round glasses, and the guy next to him, he wasn't in student leadership training, I know he wasn't, none of this lines up, it feels wrong, too big and too small at the same time, like my body doesn't fit the room and the room doesn't fit reality.

"Hey," she says, her eyes lock on mine, steady, no flinch, no calculation, no scanning for what version of me is acceptable, "it's only a practice, not the real one."

Practice, so there is a real one, so there is a next, so this is intake, assessment, something, and my throat tightens before I can stop it.

"Be yourself," she says, softer, like she's saying it to the part of me that still knows what that means, the part I've been burying under rules and masks and the whole exhausting math of being tolerable.

The teacher calls my name again.

The fan croaks, tack tack tack, and it feels faster now, or maybe my heart is syncing to it because my body always syncs to danger, always.

She pokes me again and again, not to force me, to anchor me.

I stand, and my wrist is baby-smooth, no scars, no white lines, no roadmap, and the absence is loud, louder than pain, because I remember the map that should be there, I remember the year it took, I remember the way I used to stare at it like proof, and now it's gone like it never happened, like the room is refusing to acknowledge what I paid.

Everything feels huge, I feel short, my glasses are still square, my hair is still my dad's bowl cut, and I hate that I can picture my dad's hands cutting it, straight, practical, like love can be practical, and I'm

at the front now and the teacher starts the timer and the beep are sharp and administrative, like a machine wanting its data.

"My name is," I say, and I can't believe I'm saying it like it's normal because names aren't normal for me, names are decisions, names are consequences.

"I am from South Jakarta," I say, "my dad was, I don't really know his roots, and my mom was Javanese-Sundanese."

My assigned question is on the paper, neat font, like the world can be neat, like choices can be boxed and graded.

Would you rather live a happy, fulfilling life, or a life full of regrets?

I look at the class and everyone looks familiar now, faces I forgot I remembered, like the room is pulling old files and printing them out and laying them on desks, and I recognize her again, the girl who was sitting next to me, my best friend, and the other guy in front, my closest friends in Year 8, and I want to turn to her and ask everything at once because my brain does that, it floods.

Who did you end up with, how's your mom, did you leave Jakarta, Germany, Canada, did she actually go, did you get out, are you okay, do you hate me for disappearing, I'm sorry we didn't keep in touch, I was scared, I was scared of everyone's reaction after I chose to do it, after I chose to be Ashlynn, and I called it survival but it was also shame and I never said that out loud.

The timer beeps again, impatient.

I look down at the paper again, reread it like rereading will change what it's asking.

"No," I say, and I don't know who I'm answering, the question, the room, myself.

"No," I say again, quieter, because the binary itself feels like a trap, "I won't pick between them."

"I lived a fulfilling life," I say, and fulfilling tastes too adult for this voice, too clean for what it actually was, but it's the only word

that holds the warmth, “I was happy, I experienced all the warmth I wanted.”

Even if only fragments, I want to add, and my voice tightens like it’s trying not to cry.

“Even if only fragments,” I say, and the words feel like glass, “but on the last day of my life, I died as myself, my true self.”

The room goes too quiet, like it's listening harder than it's breathing, and the fan keeps croaking and the air sticks to my skin and I can feel sweat at the base of my neck.

"I died trying," I say, and "I was happy."

"I didn't have any regrets," I say, and it isn't performance, it's relief—*finally I'm not bargaining, finally I'm just saying what's true*—like I can stop calculating what they want to hear and just hand it over.

And then my tongue moves before I can censor it, before I can perform it into something safer.

“And I now believe in God.”

The timer stops.

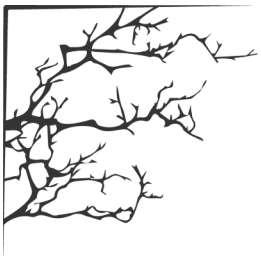
Mid-second, no beep, just silence, like someone unplugged time.

The fan catches on its croak, tack tack, then freezes, like the room held its breath—*what did I just say, what did I just do*—and outside the window the sunset holds still, pale and bleached, as if the sky is waiting for the next instruction, as if everything is waiting to see what happens when you say the thing you're not supposed to say.

“Thank you for making me live this exact moment again,” I say

I look toward the window because I need something to prove the world is still a world. Next to it, a group photo — my old body, grown, with the Maastricht people, but the frame says Brisbane, 2025.— and I see him.

Chakra, casual, walking like it’s just another afternoon, already outside, like he finished the exam early.



Chapter 1

I

Fluorescent. White, not too white. Dimmed

A lady around my mom's age. No pen in her hand. My hand holds one.

"Perhaps the pattern tells us something about how you present yourself to others."

"Perhaps we should consider what role you play in the pattern."

She says it the way doctors say things, like the words are clean even when the meaning cuts. And I hear it as diagnosis, as fact, as the answer I've been looking for — oh, it's me. I am the reason people leave. I am the reason people hurt me. I am the reason. And the relief of having an answer is so strong I don't notice it's the wrong answer.

I roll down my sleeves.

The fabric catches on still-healing skin. I press my thumbs against the inside of my wrists—not hard enough to hurt, just hard enough to feel something solid. Real.

I thank her. Tell her I'll think about what she said. The words come out smooth, practiced. I've learned how to end these sessions without making anyone worry.

The clinic hallway smells like disinfectant and air conditioning that's been running too long. I walk past the waiting room—mothers with small children, an elderly man reading the newspaper, a girl around my age staring at her phone. None of them look up.

I take the stairs instead of the elevator. Four flights down. My legs feel hollow, but I count each step. Forty-eight total. I've counted before.

The street outside is loud in the way Jakarta is always loud—motorbikes weaving through traffic, street vendors calling out, the hum of a city that doesn't pause. I stand there for a moment, letting the noise wash over me, trying to remember what I'm supposed to do next.

Outside, the rain hasn't started yet, but the air already carries that weight. November in Jakarta. Heavy before it breaks.

It is the 8th of November, 2019. A year since that day happened. The day my mom finds me lying on the bed. The monsoon arrives this week. Everything is heavy now. I can smell the way rain is coming. After that day, people start taking me seriously. I am clean now.

The alarm goes off at 6:00 a.m. I don't remember falling asleep.

School uniform. The same one I've worn since Year 10. The fabric stiff in places where sweat has dried and been washed and dried again. I button the collar, smooth down the pleats, check my reflection—then look away before I see too much.

I wake up at 6:00 a.m. School starts in half an hour, but I barely manage to get ready. By the time I arrive, the bell is already ringing.

"Dude, how's the research paper going? We need to start on it."

It is Azka, my group mate. He usually just agrees with whatever idea I suggest. I'd told him we could do a paper on mental health. My cousin had sent me all the materials the night before—she is studying psychology at the University of Indonesia and said it would be easy to use.

"Oh, that one?" I say. "We just need to send out the questionnaire."

"Yeah, fair," he says. "I'll do that later."

It is Monday. Every Monday we have the mandatory ceremony. It is really hot. Like always in Jakarta. The heat that sticks to your skin, mixed with pollution.

I go straight to the Red Cross Youth room. If you are a member, you don't have to stand through the ceremony. Three of us just have to stay nearby, in case something happens. After it ends, I go back to class.

I sit next to Reza. We sit in pairs, but it still feels like I am sitting alone.

After class, I hear voices behind me. Someone asking Reza something.

"Is he coming to the study session?"

"Yeah, probably."

He. The word registers somewhere distant. I don't turn around.

Being alone scares me. When you don't have anyone to talk to, your thoughts don't go anywhere. They just stay with you. They pile up. I start writing on this website because I don't know what else to do with them. At school, I talk to people. In tutoring too. But that is it. Once I get home, there is nothing. Every day ends the same way.

Alone.

My phone is always quiet. No messages. No notifications. Just silence. I used to think I could fix it. Like maybe there is something wrong with me that I just haven't figured out yet. I try to change the way I talk. The way I act. I try to be easier to be around.

But nothing changes.

No matter what I do, I still get treated the same. People already have their groups. They break into smaller circles, and I am never part of any of them. I am just there. If I disappear, it probably won't matter.

At first, I tell myself I can handle it. That it isn't a big deal. But after a while, even that stops working. Even the most awkward people have at least one person. Someone they can talk to.

I have no one.

II

After the last bell rings, I go straight home.

I walk past people talking about their after-school plans. Not me. I wouldn't have been allowed anyway. I go through the gate, past the beeping scanners, breathing in smoke and heat. I tap my card at the bus stop and wait.

When I get home, the house is empty.

I go to my room.

I am in Year 12, and my parents keep asking me where I want to go next. I have three options. Paris. Melbourne. Brisbane. Culinary school. The last one is because my cousin is moving there. I don't really know what I want. I just know I don't want to stay.

I've been listening to Clairo since her SoundCloud days. "Pretty Girl" on repeat for months. She's released her debut album in August—Immunity—and I haven't even realized until last week.

Around the same time, I start saving "art hoe" mood boards on Pinterest. Soft aesthetics. Film camera photos. Pink hair. Girls in oversized sweaters with plants and vinyl records. I don't tell anyone. I just scroll late at night, saving images I can't explain.

Last week, I finally order makeup. Foundation. Mascara. Lip tint. A cheap set from an online store. I tell myself it is just to try the tutorials from a YouTuber I follow. Just to see. The package arrives yesterday. I haven't opened it yet.

I hear someone coming home. My mom.

She calls for someone to come downstairs.

As I step out of my room, I catch myself in the mirror. Something feels off. Not wrong exactly. Just... different. Like something has been changing slowly, without me noticing.

"Rizki," my mom calls from downstairs to my brother.

Then, louder: "Tell him to come down here."

Him. I hear it from my room. She means me.

I rush downstairs, too lazy to get dragged into whatever it is. Dinner is unusual in my family. Sometimes we eat together,

sometimes we don't. Most of us just cook for ourselves. Today, my mom has probably bought takeaway or something.

"Have you decided yet?"

I hate this discussion. I hate it.

"I think I'm firm with Paris. For culinary school."

My dad is watching TV. News, as usual.

"Are you really sure? You should get a bachelor's degree at least."

"Why don't you just apply to business school? Accounting or finance."

"I thought our money wasn't sufficient for that."

"Different degrees, different budgets," he says.

My brother leans against the counter. "Him? Doing finance? He's not good with numbers." He looks at my dad when he says it, not at me. "It's worthless graduating with a GPA under 80%—you won't get a job in Jakarta. Just do something easier. Marketing. Hospitality."

He pauses. "Cooking—being a chef—that's tough work."

Like I am not there. Like they are discussing someone else.

Maybe they are.

"He'll never know if he doesn't try," my dad cuts in.

The conversation continues around me, not with me. They are deciding my life while I sit there, quiet. I can't really be fucked with any of this. I don't know what I want—or maybe I do. I am only confident about one thing: being a chef. Studying culinary. Everything they doubt I can do.

I am not hungry anymore.

I go back upstairs. Open my laptop.

It isn't very recent, but I have a weird feeling. I really hate how I look—not in a self-deprecating way. It is just that since puberty, I've felt strange. Like I can't accept something. I remember that time I am hiding just to watch Powerpuff Girls. Ten years ago.

That night, I am watching Atypical on Netflix. There is a character who is non-binary. I don't really understand what that means, but it feels... important. Strange. Like a word I've been looking for without knowing I am looking.

After the episode ends, I open an incognito browser.

Type: non-binary

Then: non-binary meaning

Then: is it weird to not feel like the gender you're born into

Then: dysphoria

I go into a rabbit hole. Reddit threads. Quora answers. Medical definitions. Personal stories. None of it feels quite right. But "boy" feels the farthest from right.

I keep clicking. More threads. More stories.

Then I find it: HRT. Hormone Replacement Therapy.

Male to Female.

The words sit on the screen like they've been waiting for me.

I stare at them. Read the thread. Timeline photos. Before. After. Before. After.

The "after" photos look... right. In a way I can't explain. Not because I want to look exactly like them. But because they look like they've found something I am missing.

I think about the makeup set still in its packaging. The art hoe Pinterest boards. The mirror this afternoon. The Powerpuff Girls I used to hide to watch, ten years ago.

Something has been building for a long time. I just don't have words for it yet.

I close all the tabs. Check the browser history to make sure it is really gone. My hands are shaking. I am scared. Not of what I've found. Of what my parents would think if they knew I've been looking.

I think I am too afraid to admit that I feel closer to a girl than a boy.

I walk back into my room. The door opens right in front of the mirror. I hate how I look. The facial hair that is starting to grow. The face that doesn't feel like mine.

I grab tape from the drawer. Start covering the mirror. One strip. Then another. Then another. Until I can't see myself anymore.

Every time I walk through that door now, there's just blank space. No reflection. No reminder of what I look like.

That feels safer.

III

I wait until midnight.

It has been a week since that discovery. A week of walking past the taped mirror, my peripheral vision catching the silver edge of the tape where it's starting to peel. A week of feeling relief every time I don't see my reflection—that instant exhales when I remember the glass can't catch me anymore. A week of the makeup package sitting on my desk, unopened, pushed behind my textbooks like contraband.

The parcel itself—unremarkable. A plain brown mailer that might contain anything at all. Stationery. Drawing pencils. Nothing worth a second glance. But each time I notice it sitting there, something lurches in my chest. The sensation of looking down from a great height.

Tonight, I can't wait anymore. The feeling has been building all week, pressing against my ribs until I can't breathe properly. Until I catch myself staring at the taped mirror, wondering what would happen if I just peeled back one corner. Just a sliver.

I make sure everyone is asleep. I strain to catch steps through the paper-thin wall separating our rooms—steady and rhythmic. I listen for any noise suggesting someone might wander over to check on me.

Nothing. Just the house settling into itself. The rain outside drumming against the windows in that steady Jakarta rhythm that never really stops during monsoon season.

I pull the package from under my desk, where I've hidden it behind old chemistry notes. Tear it open as quietly as I can, each rip of tape sounding impossibly loud in the silence. Foundation. Concealer. Mascara. Eyeliner. Lip tint. All of it cheap drugstore stuff, all of it ordered from an online store I found at 2 a.m. one night when I couldn't sleep, when the dysphoria threads on Reddit had pulled me too deep to surface.

The foundation bottle is smaller than I expected. The concealer wand looks like a toy. Everything feels fragile in my hands, like it might break if I hold it too tight.

I pull up the tutorial on my laptop, volume turned all the way down, headphones plugged in even though I'm not using them—just in case. A girl with pink hair doing her makeup in a tiny apartment somewhere in America. Her voice is soft, patient. She explains each step like it's the most natural thing in the world. The video is old—one of the first ones I saved to my "School Projects" folder months ago. I've watched it maybe twenty times, never actually following along. Always just... learning. Memorizing.

Until now.

My hands are shaking before I even start. Not from cold—Jakarta is never cold—but from something else. Something that feels like standing at the starting line of a race I don't know if I'm allowed to run.

I start with the foundation. The tutorial makes it look easy. Dots on the forehead, cheeks, chin, nose. Blend in circular motions. Light coverage. Natural finish. The girl's voice is so calm, so sure. My hands are shaking so much I have to restart twice. The first attempt leaves streaks. The second, I use too much and have to wipe half of it off with a tissue.

The concealer goes under my eyes. For dark circles, the girl in the video says, dabbing the product with a beauty blender I don't have. I use my fingers instead, trying to copy her motions. I have those dark

circles. From not sleeping. From staying up late scrolling through Reddit threads about dysphoria, about hormone replacement therapy, about girls who look happy in photos I save and delete and save again.

Each step feels like a small betrayal and a small victory at the same time. Betrayal of what I'm supposed to be. Victory over what I've been told I am.

Mascara next. The wand feels alien in my hand, too delicate, too precise. I nearly poke myself in the eye on the first try. Have to blink the tears away, start again. The brush feels wrong in my hand. Too small. Like it's made for fingers more graceful than mine. The second attempt goes better, but my lashes clump together in little spikes.

This is harder than the video makes it look. Everything is harder than the video makes it look.

Eyeliner is worse. The line comes out crooked, wobbling along my lid like I drew it during an earthquake. I wipe it off with a tissue, leaving a gray smudge. Try again. Still crooked, but less so. The girl in the video does it in one smooth motion, like signing her name. For me, it takes six tries to get something that doesn't look like I let a toddler draw on my face. Good enough, I tell myself. Good enough.

Lip tint last. Just a little, the tutorial says. Build it up slowly. The color is subtle—barely there coral that could pass for just having eaten something pink. Safe. Unnoticeable to anyone who isn't looking for it.

Before I start, I pull out the wig. Long, dark brown, synthetic strands that feel strange between my fingers. Too smooth. Too perfect. I ordered it from the same store as the makeup, heart hammering as I clicked "add to cart," typing in shipping instructions like I was ordering something illegal. Told myself it was for a costume. For a joke. For anything except what it actually is.

I put it on carefully, tucking my real hair back first, pulling the wig cap down, adjusting until it sits right. The weight of it feels

foreign on my head. Heavier than I expected. Like wearing someone else's thoughts.

Then I look at my laptop screen. At the webcam reflection in the black mirror of the turned-off video call window. The mirror on my wall is still taped shut, unusable, a flat plane of silver duct tape that reflects nothing. The laptop screen is all I have. My only witness.

The face staring back at me is—

I don't have words for it. Not quite mine. Not quite a stranger's. Somewhere in between those two impossibilities. It's like looking at a photograph of someone I might have been in a different universe, a different family, a different body. The features are familiar—my nose, my chin, my mother's cheekbones—but assembled into something else. Something that makes my chest tighten with recognition and terror.

A girl's face. I just stare. At the screen. At myself. At whoever this is looking back at me with my eyes.

I feel something in my chest crack open. Not breaking. Just—opening. Like a door I didn't know was locked until now, until this moment when the handle finally turns. I recognize this face. And I don't. Both things are true at the same time, existing in the same space without canceling each other out. My chest feels heavy. Not from sadness. From something else. Something bigger and more complicated than sadness. Something that feels like relief and grief braided together.

This feels wrong. In my religion, this is sin. In my culture, this is shame brought on the family. What would my parents think if they walked in right now and saw their son dressed like this? What would anyone think? The imam at Friday prayers, the aunties who ask about my grades, my classmates who already think I'm too quiet, too strange. A tear slides down my cheek before I can stop it. Then another. I watch them fall in the webcam reflection, tiny silver trails that smudge the cheap mascara I just spent twenty minutes applying.

The tears feel wrong too. Not sad tears. Not happy tears. Something else entirely. Something that doesn't have a name in any language I know.

What am I supposed to do with this feeling? This recognition? This door that's opened and can't be closed again?

Isn't this wrong? Isn't it haram? Isn't I wrong for wanting this, for sitting here at midnight with makeup on my face and a wig on my head, crying at my own reflection?

What will happen after death for people like me if I choose to be myself? Will Allah forgive me for this? For wanting to be someone else? For wanting to be myself in a way that doesn't match what everyone else sees?

I sit there for a long time. Staring at the screen. At the girl looking back at me with mascara streaking down her cheeks. Crying quietly so no one will hear, letting the tears fall without wiping them away because I don't want to smudge the makeup any more than I already have. The tutorial video has ended. The autoplay suggests another one. And another. Girls doing their makeup. Girls with pink hair and confident voices. Girls who look happy, who look like they belong in their own skin.

I don't take the makeup off right away. I just sit there. Looking at myself. At who I could be. At who I want to be. At who I am too afraid to be anywhere except in the reflection of a laptop screen at midnight in a house where everyone else is sleeping. Outside, the rain keeps falling. Heavy. Endless. The monsoon won't stop for months. Neither will this feeling, this knowing, this door that's opened in my chest.

I know that now. I've always known it, somewhere deeper than thinking. This is who I am. This is who I've always been, underneath everything else.

The knowing terrifies me.

The knowing feels like coming home.

IV

I don't know yet I've been erased before.

Don't know what it is at the time.

Bright places. Adults talking around instead of to. Certain sentences following me through rooms like they belong to someone else. I don't know something is supposed to be missing.

Just know how to sit still.

Room too bright. Not warm. Not welcoming. Just bright. Air smells like hospital not exactly. Too clean. Too sharp. Building wants you to behave. Parents sit close. Knees angled. Hands folded waiting for instructions.

I swing legs. Count floor tiles. Press fingers into plastic Ben 10 toy. Edges tracing until they leave lines in my skin. Only thing solid enough to trust. The plastic is green and rough where the molding left seams. I trace them over and over. Green plastic doesn't lie. Doesn't change. Doesn't pretend to be something else.

Man in white coat comes. Smiles at parents first.

Speaks soft. Volume equals kindness is what adults think. Kneels in front like that makes us same height. Asks my name. I tell him. He nods like it confirms something. Like my name is data. Like everything about me is data.

No one tells me why I'm here.

Cotton swab inside mouth. Scrapes cheeks until raw. I flinch. "You're doing great," he says. But I'm not doing anything. Just sitting. Just letting him scrape parts of me into small tubes. Just existing while they collect pieces.

Voices above my head while I stare at wall. Words float like they're meant for someone else. Like I'm not supposed to understand. Like understanding isn't for children.

"You have sisters."

"You have a sister."

Words without faces. Passed between adults like package. Like something being delivered. Like something being decided. I don't know what sisters means in this context. Don't know what they're packaging up and handing around.

I look at mother. She smiles polite. Nods like she's heard it before. Like this is a conversation that happens in rooms I'm never in. Like there are whole discussions about me that don't include me.

I swing legs harder. Shoes scuff the chair. Sentences don't go away after that. They show up at birthdays. Family lunches. Middle of normal conversations like it's normal. Like they've always been there.

Grandmother asks like weather.

"How are your sisters?"

"How's the other side of the family?"

Questions that assume things. That assume I know what she's talking about. That assume there's a whole architecture of family I should understand. I learn to smile. Make voice steady. Say things that end the topic quick. Nouns that don't commit to anything. "Fine." "Good." "Same as usual."

School kids talk about mum's side and dad's side like given. Family trees in worksheets. Draw branches. Label names. Everyone else seems to know where their lines go. I fill in what I can. Then hover with pencil when page asks for more. When worksheets demand completeness I don't have.

I become good at copying. Watch. Listen. Wait for right moment to laugh. Laugh too late people look. Don't laugh people look. Everything has timing I can't feel. Like there's music playing I can't hear.

At home I stop reacting when fabric feels wrong on skin. Stop asking for tag cut out. Stop telling anyone clock makes angry. Swallow it. Adults don't like problems they can't name. Problems without solutions are just complaints. Complaints are burdens.

One day someone says to mother like gift.

"Your child is cured. Free from ASD."

Mother exhales like she's been holding breath for years. Like something heavy just lifted. Like something wrong just got fixed.

I look at her mouth moving. Don't know what it means. Just relief. Know relief when I see it. The way adults smile when they think they've fixed something. When they think the broken thing isn't broken anymore. What I'm not. What I was. What I'm cured of.

December same year. Outside heavy rain. Sounds like static. Air itself breaking apart. Sound always makes scared. Too loud. Too unpredictable. Used to cover ears with palms. Press hard until pressure blocks it out. Then got AirPods Pro. Noise cancellation. First time in years rain doesn't feel threat. First time I can walk through Jakarta monsoon without my nervous system lighting up like alarm.

Walk up to house. Stomach tight. Tight that makes you breathe shallow without noticing. Front door. Normal paint. Normal handle. Normal number. But my body knows something my mind hasn't caught up to. Some animal part of me already calculating danger.

Knock.

It opens. First thing is pause. Not shock. Not recognition. Just delay. Like face in front flipping through files. Not finding the right one. I smile anyway. Make myself smaller. Make myself easier.

"Hi. It's me."

Hallway smells like someone else's life. Cooking oil. Detergent. Old furniture. Smell that should be familiar if I belong. If I'm supposed to be here. Someone calls from deeper.

"Who is it?"

Person at door hesitates. Eyes flick over me. Too fast. Too practiced. Like they're reading something written on my face I can't see.

"Ahmad's son," they say like that's enough.

Like I'm not a person. Just a category. Just a relation to someone else. Just a way to place me in context they understand.

More faces appear. Curious. Guarded. Trying polite without committing. I step inside. Hands visible. Voice calm. Version of myself that makes adults comfortable.

Cousin comes forward. Younger. Open expression. Not rehearsed. Asks questions like actually wants answers. Says names out loud. Points down hallway when he references rooms like layout matters. For a few minutes feel like being slotted into place. Awkwardly. But still. Like maybe there's a version of this that works.

Then phone lights up.

Thumb moves across screen. Nothing dramatic. No one raises voice. No one tells me to leave. Air changes anyway. Cousin starts checking between sentences. Someone walks past without looking. Someone offers drink doesn't wait for answer. Conversations angle away. Everything shifts without announcement.

People widen paths around me. Chair scrapes. Another scrapes. Furniture shifting. Small. Tidy adjustments. Room remeasuring itself. Making space that isn't welcoming. Just space that contains me without touching me.

Someone brings out family tree book. Both hands. Sets it on table. Cover dark. Spine cracks when it opens. Pages yellow at edges. Ink in different hands. Different times. Decades of careful record-keeping.

I lean in.

Find father easy. Name sits on page like it belongs. Line branches out. Siblings. Names dates margins notes. Even the people not around have ink. Even the ones who moved away. Even the ones who died. I look for mine. Scan the careful script. The dates. The connections.

Once.

Then again. Slower.

Check index. Look for cross-references. Alternative spellings. Maybe they put me somewhere else. Maybe there's a section I missed.

Flip forward back forward again like I miss it accident. Like it's just poor reading. Like I'm not looking hard enough.

I don't.

No gap no footnote no mistake. No space where my name should be. No indication I was ever supposed to exist.

I'm not on the page.

Close book. Slide it back across table. The sound too loud in quiet room. Like closing a door.

At front I stand with keys in hand. Wait for moment where leaving becomes normal. House moves around me. Shoes by door. Bag shifts. Someone laughs too loud then corrects it. Outside car door shuts. Voices in driveway. Life continuing without me in it.

Sisters arriving.

Hear them first then see through glass. Figures crossing toward entrance with easy speed of people who know they belong. I step slightly to side to make room. That's what you do when people come home. When people have a right to the space you're standing in.

Someone behind says something. Not loud. Not at me. A name maybe. A warning. Quiet enough to deny later. Sisters pause at threshold. One hand near handle. Other slows half-step behind. Something passed between house and driveway. Some signal I can't read.

They turn heads just enough to listen back toward hallway. Faces change. Not confusion. Recognition. They look at each other. Glance passes. Quick and practiced. Like signal they've used before. Like they've had this conversation without words.

Then they don't come in.

Turn away from doorway. Walk back toward driveway. Like they forget something. Like this is the plan all along. Like I'm something they need to avoid without acknowledging they're avoiding.

They don't look at me.

Don't say my name.

Just make space between us widen. Cleanly. Efficiently.

Door stays closed.

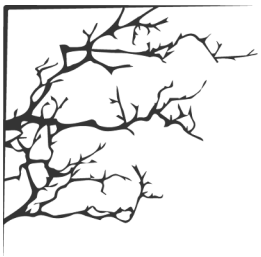
Inside voices resume. Softened by wood. Footsteps. Movement. Normal continuation of a home. Like nothing happened. Like I was never here.

I stand there a second too long. Keys still in hand like that means anything. Like having keys makes me belong somewhere.

Then I open door myself. Step out.

Don't look back.

The rain hasn't stopped. Noise cancellation keeps the sound manageable but I can still feel it. Heavy. Endless. The kind of rain that makes Jakarta streets flood. That makes everything slower. I walk through it anyway. AirPods Pro keeping the static at bay. Keeping me functional.



Chapter 2

I

It is the 16th of January, 2020. A new decade has begun. It feels weird—I haven't achieved anything yet, and a new decade has already started. I sit next to Reza in class. He leans over, whispering.

"I don't like those people that hang on the left side."

I glance over. A group of students talking by the window. The ones who always seem to have inside jokes. The ones who never look at me.

"They secretly hate people like us," Reza continues. "Excluded us, you know? Gatekeeping and shit like that."

People like us. The words sit strange. Like he is trying to build something—an alliance, maybe. Us against them. The excluded versus the excluders.

I nod. Believe him. Why wouldn't I? He is the one who talks to me. Who sits next to me. Who seems to understand. I feel a weird feeling in my stomach. Not quite pain yet. Just discomfort. Like something is wrong but I can't name it.

I can't sit up straight. Have to crouch forward, head down, trying to breathe through it. The feeling in my stomach gets worse. Sharper. Not just discomfort anymore. Actual pain.

"Reza," I say quietly. "Can you do me a favor?"

"What is it?"

"Can you tell someone to get me to the Red Cross Youth room? I don't feel well."

He looks at me. Not with concern. With something else.

"God, just stop pretending to be sick."

The words hit different than they should have. Not angry. Just dismissive. Like he's already decided what is real and what isn't.

"I'm not—"

"I know it from the way you are. You just want to skip the sports subject, right?"

I stay silent. Hold the pain. Hope it will go away if I just wait long enough. If I just don't make a scene. If I just prove I am not pretending.

It doesn't go away. I try to explain again. The pain. Where it is. How bad it is.

Reza keeps talking. Same thing. "You're pretending." "I know you." "You always do this."

I don't remember deciding to do it. I just remember my hand moving. The pen in my fist. The point pressing against my left forearm. Then pressing harder.

Then pain. Different pain. Sharp. Clean. Real.

I look down. See blood welling up where the pen has broken skin. Not a lot. But enough. Reza's face changes. His eyes go wide, scared, like he doesn't know what to do with the situation he's created.

I stand up. Grab my bag. Walk out of the classroom before anyone can stop me. In the hallway, voices behind me. Not angry. Concerned.

"Are you okay?"

"What happened?"

I turn. It is them. The people from the left side. The ones Reza said hate me.

They don't look like they hate me. They look worried.

"I'm fine," I say.

"You're bleeding."

I pull my sleeve down.

One of them—a girl I've never talked to—steps closer. "Do you need to go to the nurse? We can walk with you."

I don't understand. These are the people who exclude me. Who gatekeep. Who secretly hate people like me. That is what Reza said.

But they are here. Offering to help. Looking at me like I matter.

"What happened?" Azka appears, walking toward the class.

"Nothing. Just not feeling well," I say.

The teacher comes then. Azka explains something—I don't hear what. They tell me to go home that day. I don't argue. As I walk away, I hear one of them say, "Hope you feel better." I don't respond. Don't know how to.

II

The next week, practice exams for finals start. Computer-based. We have to bring our own laptops. I finish early. I always finish early. The exam is easy for me, even when everything else isn't.

I close the exam window and open The Sims without thinking. Just need something to do while everyone else works. Something mindless. Safe.

One of the teachers walks past. Stops. Looks at my screen.

I look up.

"I saw you. You closed the window and opened another tab."

"No, I didn't cheat. Why would I? I already finished the exam. It was easy for me."

"You just—"

Not the words. Not the decision. Just the feeling—the same sharp, clean rage from last week, but bigger this time. Nowhere to direct it except at the thing in front of me. My hands on the laptop. Pulling. The sound of plastic cracking. The screen separating from the keyboard. The hinge snapping.

Then silence. I look up. Everyone is staring. The teacher. The other students. Even Azka, from across the room. Their

faces—mouths slightly open, eyes wide. The teacher takes a step back. One student's pen hovers frozen over her answer sheet.

Like they don't know what I'll do next.

Like I don't know what I'll do next.

I put the broken laptop pieces on the desk. Stand up. Walk out.

III

After school, a girl approaches me. One of the ones from the left side. The ones Reza said hate me.

"Hey," she says. "I saw what happened. In the exam."

I wait for her to say something else. To tell me I am crazy. To tell me I shouldn't have done that. To ask what is wrong with me.

Instead, she says, "I've been there."

I look at her.

"Not exactly the same," she continues. "But... similar. I had a breakdown last year. In class. Everyone looked at me the same way they looked at you today."

"What happened?"

"My parents took me to a psychiatrist. I'm on medication now. It helps. Not perfect, but better."

Medication. Psychiatrist. The words feel foreign. Like they belong to other people. Sicker people. People who actually have problems.

Not me. I am just tired. Just stressed. Just—

"Anyway," she says. "If you need someone to talk to. Or if you want the doctor's information. I can give it to you."

She hands me a piece of paper with a phone number written on it.

I take it. Don't know what else to do.

"Thanks," I say.

She nods. Then pauses. "Also... some of us are getting food after school tomorrow. If you want to come. No pressure."

She walks away before I can answer.

I stand there with the paper in my hand. Looking at the number. Thinking about what Reza has said. How they hate people like me. How they exclude me. But she's just invited me to hang out.

She's offered help. They all have, actually. After the pen incident. After the laptop. They don't avoid me. They get closer. The ones who are supposed to hate me are the ones showing up. And Reza—the one who is supposed to be on my side—has called me a liar when I am in pain.

I fold the paper and put it in my pocket. When I get home, I don't throw it away. I put it in my desk drawer. Under the makeup, I still haven't used since that one night.

Just in case.

IV

It is just another day in Jakarta. Heavy rain—with loud noise I can't bear. Even with AirPods Pro, I can still feel it. The pressure in the air. The way sound vibrates through everything.

It is a free class. That's what we call it when a teacher is sick and no one is left to teach us. Most people talk in groups. Laugh. Make plans. I sit at my desk, alone. I haven't talked much that day.

I try to talk to Reza.

"Hey, did you—"

"God, you're such a chatterbox. Can you please shut up?"

I stop mid-sentence. Stare at him.

His face is annoyed. Not joking. Not the friendly teasing he sometimes does. Just annoyed. Like I am a problem he is tired of dealing with.

I stay silent after that.

I look around the classroom. Everyone in their groups. Talking. Laughing. I can see the people from the left side—the ones Reza said hate me. The ones who've offered to help after I bled. Who've invited me to hang out after I broke my laptop.

They don't look like they hate me. They look like they are just... existing. Having a normal free class. Not thinking about me at all.

Not hating me. Not excluding me.

Just not thinking about me.

I stand up. Walk over to Azka. He is sitting with a few others—Susi and Farah, I think. People I've seen around but never really talked to.

"Hey," I say. My voice comes out quieter than I mean it to.

"Oh, hey," Azka says, looking up.

"I was just wondering... do you guys exclude me or something? I just heard a rumor."

The words feel stupid as soon as I say them. Like I am asking to be laughed at.

Azka looks confused. "Excluded? What are you talking about?"

"I just—someone told me that your group, like, secretly hates people like me. That you gatekeep and stuff."

"Who told you that?"

I don't answer. Look at the floor instead.

Azka glances at the others, then back at me. "There's no such thing like that. We just... we don't know how to approach you. You seem distant."

Distant.

The word sits strange. Like a mirror held up that I don't want to look at.

"No, actually, I was just told about that part, so—"

"Well, come join us after school," Azka says, cutting me off. "We're planning to study together. Susi and Farah will be there too."

He says it casually. Like it isn't a big deal. Like this is just a normal invitation to a normal study session.

Like there has never been any exclusion at all.

"Oh," I say. "Okay."

"Cool. We're meeting at the library around 4."

I nod. Go back to my desk.

Sit down.

I don't realize it at the time. It is just like that?

All this time, I think they hate me. Think they exclude me on purpose. Think I need to fix something about myself before anyone will want me around.

But they just don't know how to approach me.

Because I seem distant.

I look over at Reza. He is on his phone, not looking at me. Not caring that he's just told me to shut up. Not caring that I've walked away.

I think about what he has said. About the people on the left side. About how they hate us. Exclude us. Gatekeep.

None of it is true.

He has lied.

Or maybe he believes it. Maybe he sees exclusion everywhere because that is what he wants to see. Maybe he needs enemies so he can have allies. So he can have me.

I pull out my phone. Look at the time. Three hours until the study session.

I can go. I can show up. I can see if this is real.

Or I can go home. Convince myself it is pity. Convince myself they don't really want me there. Convince myself Reza is right after all.

Outside, the rain keeps falling. Heavy. Endless.

Inside, I feel something shift. Small. Quiet.

Like a door opening. Just a crack.

I don't know yet if I'll walk through it.

Later that night, I research online again. The tape is still all over the mirror. I don't know what to do. I open up my laptop. Just six more months until I graduate. Just six more months. I will go abroad, in one of those three countries. I will be her. I don't care if that means

they will exclude me. The whole sides of my dad's bloodline already erased me. If the other sides erase me it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if I don't exist — the old me never exists anyway. I can recreate — break out from this shell to be who I am.

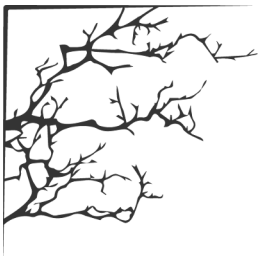
I just need to be strong. For the last six months I'm here. In another place — in a land where no one knows me. I can have a fresh start.

I can be what I want to be. I can be surrounded by people. I can be — I have a hope.

In the future. Far away from this shithole.

Just six more months.

Then I'll be free.



Chapter 3

I

At first, I almost cancel. Stand outside the library at 4:05, convincing myself it is a pity invitation. That they don't really want me there. That Reza is right about them after all.

But I walk in anyway.

Azka waves me over. Makes space. Introduces me to everyone properly this time.

Susi is studying biology. Farah is doing economics. They ask what I want to study abroad. I tell them culinary school. They don't laugh. They ask which country. I say I am deciding between three.

"Brisbane's nice," Susi says. "Australia, right? I think Chris planned to go there as well. I didn't know which city but I'm pretty sure it was Le Cordon Bleu."

The study sessions become regular. Twice a week. Sometimes three times. We work for an hour, then just talk. They ask about my day. I ask about theirs. Normal things. Easy things.

I stop sitting with Reza in class. Start sitting near Azka's group instead. Reza doesn't say anything. Just looks at me sometimes, like he is waiting for me to come back.

I don't.

For the first time in years, I have people to eat lunch with. People who text me about homework. People who send memes in a group chat I am actually part of.

I am starting to believe it. That maybe I am not the problem. That maybe I can exist in a group without being too much. Without being excluded.

I don't realize how much that study group has become a habit. How normal it feels to expect their messages, to plan around their schedules. Today is Friday. We still have three more national exams next week. We are hanging out at my place. My actual place, where I live, where they chose to come.

Azka, Susi, and Farah. Four of us are here. Just some dumb talk. The last three of our exams are easy. Thanks to those hacks one of our friends discovers. We are too chill for final school exams.

"I have an idea. Should we go bowling next week?" I suggest.

"Yooo, that sounds fun. In South Tangerang? I go there sometimes," Azka says.

Farah and Susi agree to the idea. A breeze after exams. Later we don't know what will happen to us and the rest of the world.

Later that afternoon, they are leaving.

"Hey, see you all next week, okay," Susi says.

"Yeah, just three days left," Farah adds.

I wave them all goodbye.

II

I go back to my room. Tabs still open. Beabadoobee's Space Cadet EP on loop. I've been scrolling through Brisbane pages for an hour — HRT subreddits, trans expat forums, student visa requirements, suburbs close to the culinary school. We agreed on Brisbane several days ago. Most of it still feels unreal.

I know I will be her. Not non-binary, not whatever I was calling it before when I was too scared to say it plainly. I know what I want now.

Maybe in another timeline I am too scared — too scared to lose my family, too scared to lose everything, so I stay and perform and run from myself until there is nothing left to run from.

But not this timeline. Not anymore.

In Brisbane, overseas, far from here: Ashlynn.

My mom tells me once — years ago, before I understood what it meant — that if I had been born female, she would have named me Ashlynn. Instead she gives me the other name. The one I can't use anymore. The one that never fits.

But Ashlynn is there all along. Waiting.

Just not Lynn yet. That comes later, when Ashlynn feels too long, too formal, too much like trying to be someone else's idea of a girl. Lynn is quieter. Safer. Mine.

But for now, in my head, planning for Brisbane: Ashlynn. The name my mother chooses, even if she doesn't know she is choosing it for me.

My phone buzzes.

Azka: Look up at the TV and the news right now.

I walk downstairs. My mom is in the kitchen. I grab the remote, turn on the TV.

The Minister of Education is mid-sentence.

"—all school activities cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic. National exams are cancelled. Final grades will be determined by current coursework."

I stand there. Remote in hand.

My mom looks over. "What does that mean for graduation?"

"I don't know."

"Will you still go overseas?"

I don't answer.

My phone buzzes.

> ***Azka**: Congrats! You always skip those extra classes for the national exams.*

I stare at his message.

The exams are cancelled. I don't have to sit through them. Don't have to stress about scores that will determine which universities will take me.

But if COVID is this bad — bad enough to cancel everything — does that mean the borders close? Does that mean I stay here?

Again.

I go back to my room. Sit at my desk. Stare at the taped mirror.

Three years. I keep waiting to feel something about it ending. I think I'll mourn it, or miss something, the way you're supposed to miss things when they're over. I don't. What I feel is closer to relief — that I'll never have to sit next to Reza again, never have to hear him call me *sok genius* or *pura-pura sakit* when I'm at my lowest, never have to watch him perform care while making me feel like hell. Never have to wonder, in that classroom, who actually wants me there and who is waiting for me to leave.

The last few months have been different. I start sitting with Azka's group, joining study sessions, believing maybe I am not the problem after all. But I know how it went before that. First year was fine — I had friends, actual ones, people I like. Then Year 11, and I get fixated on the wrong circle, ignore the people who care, let Reza convince me everyone else hates me until I isolate myself trying to fit in with people who never want me anyway. By Year 12 I am trying to undo it, reconnecting, being less absent, and I've mostly succeeded. The last two months have been good.

But now it is over. And I can't tell if I am relieved or just relieved it ended before I could ruin it again.

I close the journal tab. Open a new search.

Type: Brisbane COVID travel restrictions

Australian borders closed to non-citizens effective March 20, 2020.

I read it three times.

Closed.

I am not a citizen. I've been planning to apply for a student visa, leave in August after graduation, start over somewhere no one knows

me. Somewhere I can introduce myself as Ashlynn and have it just be true.

The culinary school website: admissions on hold until further notice. The visa portal: suspended. Flights: cancelled.

I close all the tabs.

In Jakarta. In this room. In this body. In this name that isn't mine.

The study group chat is moving.

***Azka**: well i guess that's it then*
***Susi**: can't believe we don't even get a proper goodbye*
***Farah**: this is so surreal*

I type: yeah. Delete it. Type: at least we don't have to take exams. Delete that too.

I've spent two months with them. Two months out of three years. Two months of finally sitting somewhere and not counting how many people in the room wish I wasn't there. And now it is over, but I am not mourning them. I am mourning what comes after — the escape I've been planning, the name I've been practicing, all of it suspended indefinitely.

I lie down. Stare at the ceiling.

The makeup kit under my bed. The girl's face in the webcam. Ashlynn. Lynn.

I'll be her eventually. Brisbane, or Paris, or Melbourne, somewhere far enough that no one carries the before-version of me in their head. Just not yet.

Outside, the rain starts. Heavy. The monsoon isn't finished.

It will keep raining for weeks.

And I'll be here.

What is the point of surviving Year 12 if I am just going to be stuck here anyway? What is the point of choosing a name I can't use yet?

It's over, isn't it?

High school. The worst of it. The gaslighting, the isolation, the breakdowns. Over. *But endings aren't always escapes.* But the person I want to become? Still waiting. Still on hold. Still six more months away. Or six more years. *Or maybe she never existed at all.*

Or never.

I say the last goodbye to my mom. My brother is staying over at our relative's in South Tangerang. My dad. I don't think I need it.

I walk through the wooden stairs, through the hallway to my bedroom. Nearly midnight. The mirror is still taped.

I approach it slowly. Pull the first strip. The adhesive resists, then gives. Behind it, glass. I pull another strip. Another. The tape curls in my hand like something shedding. The mirror clears.

I see myself.

I look at it for a long time. Longer than I need to.

The door is open. The room is quiet. Outside, the rain starts to fall.

The chair awaits.

About the Author

Nova Haddad is a name that does not exist in any family record.

She was born in Jakarta. She never left.

The Porcelain Mask is what she left behind to record herself since no one else would.